

PAKISTAN'S EVOLVING MILITANT LANDSCAPE

STATE RESPONSES & POLICY OPTIONS



PAK INSTITUTE FOR PEACE STUDIES (PIPS)



Pakistan's Evolving Militant Landscape: State Responses and Policy options

By

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1. Introduction

The militant landscape in Pakistan has become increasingly diverse, with religiously motivated, nationalist insurgent, and sectarian groups gaining momentum. This shift has been particularly noticeable since the rise of the Taliban in neighbouring Afghanistan. For instance, the Pak Institute for Peace Studies' annual security review of Pakistan for 2023 revealed a staggering 65 percent surge in terrorism-related fatalities compared to the previous year. Released in January 2024, the report highlighted that while more than 20 militant groups were active across Pakistan, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K), and Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) accounted for over 78 percent of recorded terrorist attacks in 2023.

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, militants have reportedly regrouped, carrying out frequent attacks in various districts, particularly in southern areas and the provincial capital of Peshawar, as well as adjacent Khyber district. Residents in southern and other districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) have voiced concerns and staged protests over the presence of militants in their communities, citing numerous encounters and sightings. The Ministry of Interior informed the upper house of parliament on January 2, 2024, about the alarming influx of TTP members in merged districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, highlighting their recruitment, training, and deployment of suicide bombers as major concerns. The ministry also noted the TTP's reorganization and operational expansion during the 2022 peace talks, leading to increased militant activities. Additionally, IS-K has sought to establish itself in Pakistan, targeting Shia and religious minority communities to incite sectarian violence.¹

Similarly, the Baloch insurgent groups have intensified their attacks in Balochistan, resorting to more frequent *fedayee* or coordinated suicide bombings. In January, over two dozen BLA militants carried out a significant assault in the Mach area of Bolan district, engaging security forces across multiple locations. The Baloch Liberation Front (BLF) also conducted a major attack in Kech district targeting security forces during the same month. Furthermore, the BLA and BLF, either independently or through their alliance with the Baloch Republican Guards (BRG) under BRAS, targeted political leaders, election candidates, political party offices, and the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) in the lead-up to the February 8 elections. BRAS, in particular, issued frequent statements claiming responsibility for attacks across Balochistan. While these claims were often exaggerated, they underscored the increasing frequency of attacks by Baloch insurgents.

Despite Pakistan's repeated assertions regarding the cross-border links of the intensifying terrorist onslaught, the Afghan Taliban appear either unable or unwilling to control the TTP and its cross-border incursions into Pakistan. The Taliban's so-called ideological, political and operational 'constraints' notwithstanding, many observers also suggest a degree of complicity in their inaction against the TTP. A recent report by a monitoring team of the UN Security Council has reaffirmed that the banned TTP receives significant backing and support from Al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban. The report highlighted collaboration involving not only the provision of arms and equipment but also active support for the TTP's operations against Pakistan. Despite the Afghan Taliban's stated disapproval of TTP activities beyond Afghanistan, many TTP fighters reportedly conduct cross-border attacks in Pakistan without facing meaningful consequences. Citing reports, the UNSC review asserted that some Taliban members, motivated by perceived religious obligations, have joined the ranks of the TTP, strengthening its operations. Additionally, TTP

¹ Iftikhar A. Khan, "TTP influx continues in merged districts, Senate told," *Dawn*, January 3, 2024.

members and their families allegedly receive regular aid packages from the Afghan Taliban, indicating a deeper level of support.²

Following the February 8 elections, the Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI) has secured the government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province as PTI-supported independent candidates clinched the majority seats in the provincial assembly. However, with no party securing the required simple majority in the national assembly to independently form the government, the PML-N-led ruling alliance remains elusive for the PTI. Presently, Pakistan has sidelined the option of engaging in talks with militants. Nonetheless, the PTI has consistently advocated for dialogue with the TTP, and with its provincial government now in place, it may push for such negotiations. However, if the federal government, led by non-PTI parties, does not endorse this approach, it could lead to a policy deadlock in countering militancy and terrorism.

At a time when a major shift is happening in the militant landscape of the country and a political transition is taking place, it is imperative to reevaluate the evolving positions and strategies of not only the militant groups but also the newly formed governments. Against this backdrop, this report seeks to delve into the emerging dynamics of Pakistan's militant landscape and security besides analysing state capacities and responses, along with potential policy shifts post-transition. While much of the research and analyses in Pakistan since Taliban takeover of Kabul has predominantly focused on aspects such as the Taliban regime's governance, Pak-Afghan bilateral affairs, and regional geopolitics, there remains a glaring absence of credible and comprehensive investigations into the broader repercussions of the evolving Afghan scenario on Pakistan's security landscape. Despite periodic headlines on the Pakistani government's negotiations with the proscribed TTP, there has been a dearth of empirical research exploring the overall fallout of Afghanistan's changing dynamics on Pakistan's security.

In light of this context, PIPS undertook a firsthand, empirical investigation into the expanding terrorism landscape in the country, scrutinizing the formation of new alliances and networks among terrorist groups, mapping the geographical spread of insecurity and violence, and assessing their ramifications for both domestic and regional security paradigms, among other things. The insights gleaned from this investigation were subsequently utilized to formulate context-specific policy recommendations on how to manage or prevent the negative fallout from evolving Afghanistan situation on Pakistan and the region.

Methodology and constraints

As mentioned before, this report represents the outcome of a research study undertaken by PIPS to develop an updated assessment of militant and security landscapes of Pakistan's different regions, considering the influences of both domestic factors and the situation in Afghanistan. The study was conducted over the course of one year, with primary and secondary data collected from June 2023 to February 2024.

The collection of secondary data, encompassing literature review and desk research, involved an extensive examination of available literature pertaining to the activities, trends, and evolution or transformations of militant groups within Pakistan over the past two years, notably since the Taliban assumed control in Kabul. References to militant groups' past activities and agendas, predating 2021, were included where relevant. This comprehensive review delved into both established and emerging violent actors within the militant landscape, analyzing their structures,

² Baqir Sajjad Syed, "TTP backed by Al Qaeda, Afghan Taliban: UN," *Dawn*, February 1, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1810228/ttp-backed-by-al-qaeda-afghan-taliban-un>

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agendas, connections, operational areas, and tactics. Additionally, it mapped the extent of terrorist violence in Pakistan following the Afghan Taliban's rise to power. Extensive literature on Pakistan's efforts to counter the menace of militancy and terrorism, as well as its approach toward the new Afghan government, was also gathered and scrutinized. In the process of collecting secondary data, PIPS heavily relied on its digital database on security incidents (accessible at www.pakpips.com/app/database) to extract and analyze quantitative data or statistics regarding trends in terrorist attacks and counter-militant actions by security forces, among other relevant metrics.

To collect the empirical or primary data, PIPS conducted extensive field visits across the country to interact with a diverse array of resource persons including scholars, journalists, community leaders and representatives, religious parties and groups, security officials, civil society organizations focusing on relevant issues, as well as security and militancy experts, among others.

In total, PIPS conducted over 150 comprehensive qualitative interviews, employing a semi-structured questionnaire. This included 50 interviews each in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (primarily in Peshawar and DI Khan) and Balochistan (in Quetta and Chaman), while 20 interviews were conducted in both Karachi and Lahore, and 12 interviews in Islamabad. Additionally, PIPS facilitated five (5) Focus Group Discussions, each comprising approximately 10 experts, conducted between February and March 2024. These FGDs were held in four provincial capitals and Islamabad, providing deeper insights into the research questions at hand.

These interviews included extensive interactions with a total of 28 senior counterterrorism and security officials within Pakistan including from the CTDs across all four provinces and representatives from the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) in Islamabad, among others. While a few interviews were not permitted to be recorded, they were authorized for quotation purposes to facilitate analysis. Additionally, five interviews were held with former officials from CTDs and NACTA. Several police officials with prior experience in counter-terrorism tasks shared their insights and perspectives on the state's counter-terrorism strategies. The subsequent analysis of militant groups and the state's responses is largely drawn from a comprehensive review of these interviews.

At each stage, the collected data underwent meticulous documentation, categorization, and analysis to facilitate the production of this report. The analytical process was both progressive and comparative in nature. As previously mentioned, quantitative data pertaining to trends and patterns of terrorist violence, as well as security forces' search and kinetic actions, was subjected to statistical analysis. Subsequently, this data was integrated into the main dataset as necessary to meet the needs and requirements of the analysis.

While considerable empirical data was gathered within Pakistan through extensive fieldwork, information and perspectives from Afghanistan primarily relied on secondary sources. The sole empirical investigation conducted in this context involved interviews with Pakistani religious scholars and journalists who had recently travelled to Afghanistan and engaged with various stakeholders there. PIPS acknowledges that conducting personal visits to Afghanistan to directly gather firsthand accounts from key individuals could have enhanced the study's value.

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2. Militant landscape in Afghanistan after Taliban takeover

After Taliban's takeover of Kabul, Afghanistan's neighbors are becoming increasingly concerned that their return to power has emboldened terrorist groups and networks, which are using the 'hospitable' environment to regroup, rearm, and recruit substantially. The primary concern for Afghanistan's neighbors in the region, as well as the broader international community, is the credibility of the Taliban's counterterrorism assurances extended to other countries.³

In Afghanistan, terrorist groups can be broadly categorized into two groups: those aligned with the Taliban and those in opposition to it. Among the Taliban's allies are al-Qaeda, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and a number of Central Asian jihadis. The main group of concern that's opposed to the Taliban is the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K).

Experts assert that despite the Taliban's policies or stance towards militants in Afghanistan, the latter feel more at ease there now, given the significant pressure they faced under previous Afghan governments. Additionally, the Taliban's perspective on terrorism differs significantly from ours, which complicates Pakistan's efforts to persuade them, among other reasons, to take action against the TTP.⁴

According to a 2023 report by the UNSC, the Taliban-led Afghanistan remains the primary source of terrorist threat for Central and South Asia. This threat mainly originates from groups including the IS-K, Al-Qaeda, TTP, as well as ETIM/TIP, and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, among others. What is worrisome, according to the report, "these groups enjoy greater freedom of movement in Afghanistan owing to the absence of an effective Taliban security strategy." The report also observed that the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan has emboldened TTP to escalate attacks against Pakistan, while strengthening its position in Afghanistan.⁵

Meanwhile, as noted earlier, most analysts appear unconvinced that the Taliban will or could fulfil their promises on these and other foreign militant groups, which not only continue to be present on Afghan soil but have become more active since the Taliban takeover.

While Al-Qaeda remains entrenched in Afghanistan, the TTP with a presence of thousands of fighters across eastern Afghanistan has vigorously expanded and escalated its operations against Pakistan, killing hundreds of Pakistani security forces personnel and even some civilians. The group appeared to be easily marshalling material resources, from weapons to recruits, from its safe havens in Afghanistan, including some Afghan Taliban fighters. An expert interviewed for this study argued that with the Afghan Taliban's takeover of Kabul and the speedy withdrawal of the NATO forces, the TTP or Pakistani Taliban received a boost as both the Taliban have one emir, Hibatullah Akhунzada. Additionally, as the TTP had hosted the Afghan Taliban when they were

³ Nishank Motwani, "Making sense of the Taliban's counterterrorism assurances", Middle East Institute, August 18, 2023, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/making-sense-talibans-counterterrorism-assurances>

⁴ PIPS' interview with Aamer Raza, Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science, University of Peshawar. September 5, 2023.

⁵ The 31st report by the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team of the UNSC, 13 February 2023, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N23/038/91/PDF/N2303891.pdf?OpenElement>

fighting the US, both respect each other now. This is the factor behind the TTP's newfound facilitation in Afghanistan.⁶

Among Central Asian jihadis, Tajikistan-focused jihadis that are part of the Jamaat Ansarullah have attempted cross-border infiltration and attacks, while the Turkistan Islamic Party has also remained in the country.

Meanwhile, weak economy, poor governance, and humanitarian crisis amidst the international community's reluctance to recognise the Taliban government are not going to help the Taliban in providing security to their people and fulfil the promises they made to the world. Nor will their ideological sensitivities allow them to act against the militant groups based in Afghanistan (except the IS-K), which will continue to haunt the securities of neighbouring countries.

This section of the report analyses the emerging militant landscape of Afghanistan with a focus on the evolving strength, agendas, and future course of action of transnational terrorist groups present on Afghan soil. Another underlying goal is to assess the threats emanating from this militant landscape for the countries in the region, mainly Pakistan.

2.1 Afghanistan's emerging militant landscape

Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)

Reports by UNSC-led 1988 Taliban sanctions committee monitoring team suggest the banned TTP has up to 4,000 to 5,000 fighters based in east and south-east areas of Afghanistan and make up the largest group of foreign fighters based there. However, independent sources interviewed for this study contest this figure, estimating the combined total strength of TTP members inside Afghanistan and Pakistan to be between 15,000 to 20,000.⁷

Independent reports also indicate that the TTP has significantly entrenched itself in Afghanistan, with its members particularly concentrated in Kunar province, which shares a border with Pakistan's tribal areas. In Kunar, they have fostered strong relationships with the local populace. Colonel Afzal, head of intelligence at CTD Punjab, highlights that the TTP has established strongholds in Paktia, Paktika, and Khost provinces, with considerable influence extending into Zabul and Kandahar.

Noor Wali Mehsud maintains effective coordination with his fighters at the district level. He has actively mediated disputes among various leaders and factions within the group, attracting new groups and leaders into the fold. However, the TTP has encountered challenges in Nuristan and Kunar due to the influence of Daesh and Jamaatul Ahrar in those areas. The death of Khalid Khurasani exacerbated tensions, raising suspicions of insider involvement, but Noor Wali has made efforts to mitigate these tensions, albeit not entirely resolving them.⁸ Some observers noted that TTP is mainly in rural areas of Afghanistan with only limited presence in urban centers such as in Kabul.⁹

Nonetheless, since assuming power, the Afghan Taliban have taken almost negligible action to restrain the TTP, allowing it to bolster its operational capabilities and launch anti-Pakistan propaganda and cross-border attacks. Despite the Taliban's claims that the TTP and similar groups

⁶ PIPS' interview with Dr. Qibla Ayaz, Chairman Council of Islamic Ideology, in Islamabad on September 12, 2023.

⁷ PIPS' interviews with Aqeel Yousafzai, Peshawar-based journalist, and Colonel Afzal, CTD Punjab Intelligence Head.

⁸ PIPS' interview with Colonel Afzal, CTD Punjab Intelligence Head, in Lahore in September 2023.

⁹ PIPS' interview with Majid Nizami, senior journalist, in Lahore on September 5, 2023.

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in Afghanistan are unarmed, discussions with informed journalists and experts revealed that the TTP was tasked with manning security checkpoints in certain Afghan regions by the Taliban. In May 2022, unverified reports surfaced suggesting that the TTP had deployed hundreds of militants to support the Taliban against northern resistance forces in Panjshir. This collaboration between the TTP and the Afghan Taliban is not new; historically, the TTP has provided both operational and ideological support to the Taliban, with every TTP leader pledging allegiance to the Afghan Taliban's emir. Following the Taliban's takeover, the TTP not only congratulated them but also publicly renewed its allegiance to the Afghan Taliban's emir.

The longstanding issue of cross-border shelter and support for the TTP and other Pakistani militants within Afghanistan has been a consistent concern for Pakistan. Islamabad had repeatedly accused the former Afghan president Ashraf Ghani's government of harbouring anti-Pakistan militant groups in Afghanistan. Hopes were raised in Pakistan with the Taliban's return to power in Kabul, anticipating that they would curb the activities of such militant groups. However, contrary to expectations, the Afghan Taliban's resurgence has only bolstered the TTP. Following the takeover of Kabul, the Afghan Taliban released hundreds of TTP prisoners, including senior leaders like Maulvi Faqir Mohammad, from prisons in the capital. These releases were celebrated by the TTP with large motor rallies and caravans in eastern Afghanistan, according to Abdul Sayed, a researcher based in Sweden. TTP leaders view the Afghan Taliban as their role model, arguing that persistence in their fight against the Pakistani state will lead to a similar victory to what the Taliban achieved in Afghanistan.¹⁰

Instead of actively discouraging anti-Pakistan violence by the TTP or taking decisive action against them, which though many believe is unlikely, the Afghan Taliban have pursued the approach of facilitating talks between Pakistan and the TTP to negotiate a peace agreement. While some oppose negotiating with terrorists, others in Pakistan recognize the necessity of seeking a political settlement with the TTP, as pressuring the Afghan Taliban to act against the TTP beyond a certain point may prove futile. However, scepticism remains regarding the TTP's willingness to quit violence and accept Pakistan's basic demands. For one, Pakistan's Special Representative on Afghanistan Ambassador Asif Durrani said in an expert consultation organized by Pak Institute for Peace Studies in Islamabad in March 2024 that Pakistan's recent attempt at peace talks with the banned TTP failed because the militant group was neither ready to surrender nor willing to swear allegiance to the Constitution of Pakistan. The third primary reason for the deadlock in talks was that the group didn't want to face the law for the heinous crimes it committed, including the attack on the Army Public School (APS) in Peshawar.¹¹

Pakistan is indeed caught in a dilemma as on the one hand it cannot push the Afghan Taliban around to act against the TTP beyond a limit and on the other hand it cannot afford the TTP's resurgence either in Afghanistan or Pakistan. Perhaps that was why Pakistani government sought the Afghan Taliban's help in reaching out to and reconciling with the TTP, a ploy that did not work. Pakistan appears to have abandoned the option of engaging in direct talks with the TTP, despite continued calls from the Taliban for such dialogue. At the same time, the Afghan Taliban are also seemingly pushing Pakistan by adding to its border insecurity and not acting against the TTP with a purpose to extract concessions in bilateral and multilateral perspectives. All this does not bode

¹⁰ Abdul Sayed, "The evolution and future of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 21, 2021.

¹¹ Views expressed in Pak Institute for Peace Studies' 12th quarterly consultation on "Afghan peace and reconciliation: Pakistan's interests and policy options," held in Islamabad on March 15, 2024. Report can be seen here: <<https://www.pakpips.com/article/7949>>

well for Pakistan's internal and border securities and Pakistani Taliban would remain a major contributor to that threat.

Al-Qaeda

Despite President Biden's assertion that Al-Qaeda is no longer present in Afghanistan and that the Taliban are assisting the US in combating terrorism, the situation on the ground appears to contradict his claim. This sentiment was reiterated by US diplomats after their initial official encounter with Taliban representatives in July of this year. While the US State Department acknowledged a decrease in large-scale attacks in Afghanistan, endorsing the Taliban's anti-terrorism efforts may disregard broader transnational threats.¹²

Nonetheless, Al-Qaeda has exhibited relative restraint, remaining notably silent even in the aftermath of reports of its leader's demise, amidst emerging indications of Saif al-Adl being appointed as Zawahiri's successor. The most significant instance of violence incitement by the group within the past year involved threats against Sweden and Denmark, urging attacks on their embassies globally. Recently declassified, a report from the U.S. intelligence community evaluated that Al-Qaeda lacks the capacity to pose a threat to the United States until 2024.

The Taliban has been denying the presence of Al-Qaeda militants in Afghanistan, but the United Nations and others have been constantly indicating the presence of Al-Qaeda members and leaders in multiple Afghan provinces. For instance, a UNSC January 2024 report noted that the bond between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda persisted, with the latter operating under Taliban protection in Afghanistan. The report cited regional states' viewpoints to claim that the presence of senior Al-Qaeda figures in the country remains unchanged, posing a persistent threat in the region and potentially beyond. Despite this, the Taliban endeavors to downplay these connections and reduce their visibility.¹³

The group congratulated the Taliban on August 31, 2021, for taking power in Kabul. However, as noted earlier, the group has been keeping a strategic silence in Afghanistan, apparently to avoid any possible trouble or inconvenience to its ally, the Taliban. Experts also assert that the presence of Al-Qaeda leaders in Afghanistan may have more strategic and security purposes than operational ones as it mostly operates in collusion with its local allies and cells in different parts of the world including South Asian region. Secondly, it also is recovering from the loss of its many leaders in recent times, which also hinders its capability to conduct high-profile attacks from Afghanistan. However, such attacks still remain the group's long-term goal.

In early 2021, US intelligence agencies assessed that "Al-Qaeda was at its weakest point in years, comprising fewer than two hundred members in Afghanistan." However, another estimate in April 2022 suggested that the total number of its members in Afghanistan may have doubled to four hundred fighters, primarily originating from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, and Pakistan.¹⁴ Afghanistan remains a key strategic hub for Al-Qaeda, offering refuge, security, and connectivity with its regional affiliates. Unlike other countries, Afghanistan provides Al-Qaeda with a sympathetic regime in the form of the Taliban, with whom the group shares a longstanding

¹² Siddhant Kishore, "Resurgence and realities: Afghanistan's shifting terror threats", Geopolitical Monitor, August 23, 2023, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/resurgence-and-realities-afghanistans-shifting-terror-threats/>

¹³ The report can be downloaded here: <<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4035877?v=pdf>>

¹⁴ Seth G. Jones, "Countering resurgent terrorist threat in Afghanistan," Council on Foreign Relations, April 14, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/report/countering-resurgent-terrorist-threat-afghanistan>

relationship, including ties with key figures such as the Taliban's interior minister, Sirajuddin Haqqani.¹⁵

Similarly, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), which is led by Osama Mehmood and his deputy Atif Yahya Ghouri, also reportedly retains a presence in Afghanistan's Ghazni, Helmand, Kandahar, Nimruz, Paktika and Zabul provinces. Compared to Al-Qaeda's central leadership, its South Asian chapter, or AQIS, is more active in messaging and seeking support for jihadist causes, in particular against India. Yet, AQIS has not been directly implicated in any acts of violence. However, there are reports indicating that AQIS, along with potentially Al-Qaeda's central leadership in the country, is now under the purview of a department within the Taliban's intelligence agency, the GDI, responsible for managing foreign fighters.

Al-Qaeda may be less threatening to Afghanistan's neighbours due to its currently heightened focus on Africa and Middle East, weakening strength, and also the Taliban's influence, among other things. Others however contest the argument on the basis of Al-Qaeda's continued association and engagement with the Pakistani Taliban as well as Central Asian militants. After losing its alliance with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Al-Qaeda has improved its ties with a number of other Central Asian groups in Afghanistan, such as Khatiba Imam al-Bukhari, Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad, and Islamic Jihad Group, which remain based in parts of northern Afghanistan.

Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K)

The IS-K's overall violence may have dropped in Afghanistan over the recent years, but its threat including for the country and wider region has persisted and compounded. A UNSC report in January 2024 noted that despite the "recent loss of territory, casualties, and high attrition among senior and mid-tier leadership figures, IS-K continues to pose a major threat in Afghanistan and the region."¹⁶ While the Taliban claim to have defeated IS-K, terrorist attacks by the group persist. The Taliban leaders also appear divided regarding their approach to both the group and sympathetic Salafist communities. The newly formed Batah Unit within the Taliban's General Directorate of Intelligence seeks to persuade educated IS-K prisoners to abandon Salafist ideology in favor of Deobandism. In contrast, IS-K has embraced a more inclusive recruitment strategy, also welcoming non-Salafists and appealing to disillusioned Taliban members and foreign fighters.

Sanaullah Ghafari, alias Shahab al-Muhajir, remains alive and leads the group, reportedly located in Kunar. Ghafari was likely targeted in 2023 while leaving a Jamaat-ul-Ahrar training center in Kunar, potentially resulting in injury.¹⁷

IS-K has managed to conduct some high-profile attacks, including the killing of Taliban leaders, as well as attacks in neighboring Pakistan and Iran. It has also demonstrated signs of integration into a strong transnational network, with reports that the group is receiving funding and guidance from ISIS in Iraq, Syria and Somalia and providing direction to operatives in Maldives.¹⁸ The US Department of Homeland Security's 2024 threat assessment highlighted the increased prominence

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Thirty-third report of the UNSC's Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team released on January 23, 2024. The report can be downloaded here: < <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4035877?v=pdf> >

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Asfandyar Mir, "Two years under the Taliban: Is Afghanistan a terrorist safe haven once again?", USIP, August 15, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/08/two-years-under-taliban-afghanistan-terrorist-safe-haven-once-again>

of IS-K following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Besides conducting high-casualty attacks, it has been utilizing English-language media to globalize its local grievances.¹⁹

The Islamic State's Khorasan chapter emerged in early January 2015, when the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) announced its expansion to what is known in history as "Khorasan" region covering parts of modern-day Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asia. The IS-K was initially led by some splintering commanders of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) including Hafiz Saeed Khan; he along with few other TTP commanders from Waziristan, Mohmand and Bajaur had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State leader in 2014. They had fled Pakistan due to Zarb-e-Azb military operation to settle initially in Afghanistan's Nangarhar province. According to one account, as of 2017, some members of Pakistani militant groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jamaatud Dawa, as well as the Afghan Taliban's Haqqani Network, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) had also defected to IS-K.²⁰ Some experts believe that IS-K's expansion in Afghanistan was largely made possible due to the platform provided by the Taliban's rival Afghan jihadists and religious and political rivals, mainly including Afghan Salafists and militants affiliated with Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin (HIG) – a major offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood in Afghanistan.²¹

Territorial losses in Syria and Iraq had increased the Islamic State group's focus on Afghanistan from where it continued to improve its networks in the region. However, the group was severely weakened through mid-2021 because of the counterterrorism operations conducted by the US and Afghan forces, clashes with the Taliban, and internal divisions. The US withdrawal has allowed the group to recover, regroup and strengthen its membership and position in Afghanistan. For instance, in July 2021, a month before the Taliban takeover of Kabul, a UN report had estimated the number of IS-K fighters in Afghanistan around 500 to 1,500. However, according to multiple accounts, since the Taliban takeover the number of IS-K militants is believed to have doubled in the country.

Similarly, after the US-Taliban Doha deal, IS-K has reportedly intensified attacks and has indeed "announced a new long war" against the Taliban. The group perpetrated 339 attacks in Afghanistan in 2021 compared to 82 such attacks it claimed in the country in 2020.²² Secondly, the group started developing and strengthening its networks in urban areas by recruiting disgruntled, battle-hardened members of other groups as well as self-radicalized educated youths mainly adhering to Salafi school of thought. Some experts claimed, as cited earlier, that the IS-K's Kabul network, in particular, had "also absorbed splinters and defectors from the Taliban's radical Haqqani network."²³ Thirdly, IS-K has waged an extensive propaganda war against the Taliban declaring them as allies and puppets of the US, who have 'deviated from their jihadist purpose'; this is how the Taliban used to propagate against previous Afghan governments.

¹⁹ Lucas Webber & Riccardo Valle, "The Islamic State's Central Asian contingents and their international threat," Hudson Institute, October 16, 2023, <https://www.hudson.org/foreign-policy/islamic-states-central-asian-contingents-their-international-threat>

²⁰ Amira Jadoon, et al., "Challenging the ISK brand in Afghanistan-Pakistan: Rivalries and divided loyalties," CTC Sentinel, Volume 11, Issue 4, April 2018, <https://ctc.usma.edu/challenging-isk-brand-afghanistan-pakistan-rivalries-divided-loyalties/>

²¹ Abdul Sayed, "Why Islamic State Khurasan poses an indigenous threat to the Afghan Taliban," GW (George Washington University) Program on Extremism, May 9, 2022, <https://extremism.gwu.edu/ISK-poses-indigenous-threat-to-Afghan-Taliban>

²² <https://twitter.com/abdsayed/status/1476827070307127298>

²³ Abdul Sayed, "ISIS-K is ready to fight the Taliban," *The Washington Post*, August 29, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/08/29/abdul-sayed-isis-k-taliban-afghanistan-threat>

The extent of the threat the IS-K group could pose to countries in the region can be assessed from the diverse origin of its fighters in Afghanistan who come from the Middle East, Central Asia, Pakistan, India, Kashmir and China, etc; about half of the IS-K fighters in Afghanistan are foreigners.²⁴ The IS-K is reportedly engaged in recruiting “educated and highly radicalized adherents of Salafism from Pakistan, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Maldives and some Ikhwani militia members of former Afghan militant groups.”²⁵

Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP)/East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM)

The Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), also known as East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) remains active and operational in Afghanistan. Some even assert that ETIM/TIP has expanded its operational space in the post-Taliban Afghanistan, cultivating relations with local commanders to operate locally. The group has relocated from Badakhshan, reportedly after the Taliban pressure on Chinese behalf, and is now headquartered in Baghlan province of Afghanistan. However, the group's operational networks keep extending to multiple provinces.

There are growing concerns, mainly in China, over the group's reported collaboration with other terrorist groups, especially TTP and Al-Qaeda, in recruitment, training, planning attacks, and posing a regional threat. IS-K is also actively engaged in recruiting ETIM members, with reports that some ETIM members have already defected to the IS-K. Funding sources of the group include zakat, extortion, kidnapping, drug trafficking and underground money exchanges.²⁶

Some ETIM/TIP members have fraudulently obtained local identity documents by fabricating Afghan identities. The group is seeking to further entrench its presence in the country by both organizing marriages to local women and facilitating the relocation of Uyghur women to Afghanistan. They are also reported to operate schools that promote extremism. As per the report, approximately 40 to 50 Uyghurs are also affiliated with IS-K in Nuristan province of Afghanistan, while the group also collaborates with Pakistani TTP.²⁷

However, historically the group has remained a key ally of the Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. For one, the TIP head Abdul Haq al-Turkistani, a US and UN-designated terrorist, was once a member of Al-Qaeda's elite shura council. Similarly, his predecessor, Hassan Mahsum also known as Abu-Muhammad al-Turkestani, was also an Al-Qaeda-linked jihadist, who was killed by Pakistani security forces in ex-FATA region in 2003.

As per various counts, the number of TIP/ETIM members in Afghanistan is between 200 and 700 fighters. China is extremely concerned about the presence and activities of TIP/ETIM in Afghanistan, which it blames for many attacks at home. How the Taliban deal with the group will be determining in part its relationship with China.

Many believe that the Taliban's return to power could embolden the group and add to the Taliban's problems in terms of their relationship with China and other neighbours. The October 2021 Kunduz attack, reportedly conducted by an IS-K-associated Uyghur suicide bomber, had come at

²⁴ Seth G. Jones, “Countering resurgent terrorist threat in Afghanistan,” Council on Foreign Relations, April 14, 2022.

²⁵ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury “View: Can Taliban tame ETIM, checkmate ISIS-K and ensure China's security?” *Economic Times*, September 7, 2021, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/view-can-taliban-tame-etim-checkmate-isis-k-and-ensure-chinas-security/articleshow/85998917.cms?from=mdr>

²⁶ Thirty-third report of the UNSC's Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team released on January 23, 2024. The report can be downloaded here: < <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4035877?v=pdf>>

²⁷ Complete report can be downloaded here: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/333/77/PDF/N2233377.pdf?OpenElement>

a critical moment for Taliban-TIP relations. At the same time, experts assert that the Taliban's hard action against them could trigger a backlash from TIP militants which would be an ideal opportunity for IS-K to recruit disgruntled fighters.²⁸

IMU and other Central Asian Groups

Like other Central Asian terrorist groups such as Islamic Jihad Group (IJG) and Khatiba Imam al-Bukhari (KIB), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) had also actively participated in the Taliban-led fighting against the international forces in Afghanistan. Since the Taliban's capture of Kabul, these are all now experiencing greater freedom of movement in the country.

Founded in 1998, IMU intended to replace the 'secular' Uzbek government with sharia law and establish Islamic rule. Experts assert that an increasingly repressive regime fanned militant Salafism in Uzbekistan and boosted the supply of Uzbek fighters to both Afghanistan and Syria. Until Islamic State group emerged, IMU as a whole remained closely aligned with the Afghan Taliban, TTP, and Al-Qaeda. In August 2015, IMU's emir Omar Ghazi and hundreds of fighters pledged allegiance to the Islamic State group. Around that time, IMU fighters in Syria were already absorbed into the Islamic State, and many had relocated from Afghanistan to there. Subsequent clashes with the Taliban and the killing of Ghazi accelerated internal discord within the IMU, and in June 2016 an IMU faction publicly denounced IS-K, reaffirming its loyalty to the Taliban and Al-Qaeda.²⁹

After losing greater alliance with the IMU, Al-Qaeda has been improving its ties with a number of other Central Asian groups in Afghanistan, such as Khatiba Imam al-Bukhari, Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad, and Islamic Jihad Group, which remain based in parts of northern Afghanistan.³⁰ Al-Qaeda has also maintained relations with the ETIM and has forged ties with the breakaway factions of the IMU.³¹

Islamic Jihad Group (IJG) is led by Ilimbek Mamatov, a Kyrgyz national; his deputy, Amsattor Atabaev is from Tajikistan. The group was termed in the UN's February assessment as "the most combat-ready Central Asian group in Afghanistan." It operates primarily in Badakhshan, Baghlan and Kunduz provinces.

Meanwhile, the *Khatiba Imam al-Bukhari* (KIB) is led by Dilshod Dekhanov, a Tajik national. The group is currently located in the Bala Murghab district of Badghis province. The group's strength has increased through the recruitment of local Afghans.

Jamaat Ansarullah (banned in Tajikistan as a terrorist group) is closely associated with Al-Qaeda and Taliban in Afghanistan. Following deteriorating relations between Tajikistan and the Taliban in the autumn of 2021, Ansarullah fighters were deployed with Taliban special units along the border of Tajikistan in Badakhshan, Kunduz and Takhar provinces. Jamaat Ansarullah senior leader Muhammad Sharipov (alias Mahdi Arsalan) [currently] controls security in five districts of

²⁸ Nodirbek Soliev, "Why Is the Islamic State in Afghanistan's Propaganda Targeting China?," *The Diplomat*, October 26, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/10/is-the-islamic-state-in-afghanistan-targeting-china/>

²⁹ Amira Jadoon, et al., "Challenging the ISK brand in Afghanistan-Pakistan: Rivalries and divided loyalties," CTC Sentinel, Volume 11, Issue 4, April 2018.

³⁰ Asfandyar Mir, "Afghanistan's terrorism challenge: the political trajectories of Al-Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban, and the Islamic State," Middle East Institute, October 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2020-10/Afghanistan%27s%20Terrorism%20Challenge.pdf>

³¹ Ibid.

Badakhshan province under the Taliban administration.³² Arsalan and other Tajik militants are known as the "Tajik Taliban" in Afghanistan.³³

Jamaat Ansarullah's funding stems from both the Taliban and Al-Qaida. Notably, JA fighters constitute the primary force within Lashkar-e Mansoori, the Taliban's specialized unit for suicide bombings. There have been recent reports indicating that several JA commanders have aligned themselves with IS-K in Nangarhar and Kunar Provinces.³⁴

2.2 Fallout or impact on Pakistan

- **Escalating terrorist violence in Pakistan**

Pakistani authorities have continuously provided the Taliban government with evidence gathered by law enforcement and security agencies, indicating the TTP's operations from Afghan territory to orchestrate attacks within Pakistan. However, the Afghan Taliban have consistently denied these allegations. Pakistani investigators have also been highlighting an increasing presence of Afghan suicide bombers involved in attacks within Pakistan, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan's de facto government have also witnessed a deterioration, as the Taliban regime continues to assert that the TTP operates solely within Pakistan's borders. They contend that TTP's attacks on Pakistani soil are an internal matter for Pakistan to address independently. For instance, during an interview for this study, the Afghan consul general in Quetta reiterated the same stance emphasizing that the TTP is an internal issue for Pakistan, known to the entire world. He highlighted the September 2023 attack in Chitral as an example, claiming that it was carried out by TTP fighters from within Pakistan. He argued that it is inconceivable for fighters from Afghanistan to launch attacks inside Pakistan.³⁵

Nevertheless, Pakistan's security situation has markedly worsened in recent years, particularly since the Afghan Taliban assumed power in Kabul in August 2021.³⁶ For the third consecutive year, Pakistan experienced a surge in terrorist attacks in 2023. Following the launch of military operations such as Zarb-e-Azb and the National Action Plan in 2014-15, there was a gradual decline in terrorist violence and resulting casualties until 2020. However, from 2021 onwards, this downward trend was not sustained, and the frequency of terrorist attacks began to rise again (*See Chart 1*). This trend underscores a resurgence in militant presence and activities within Pakistan over the past three years.

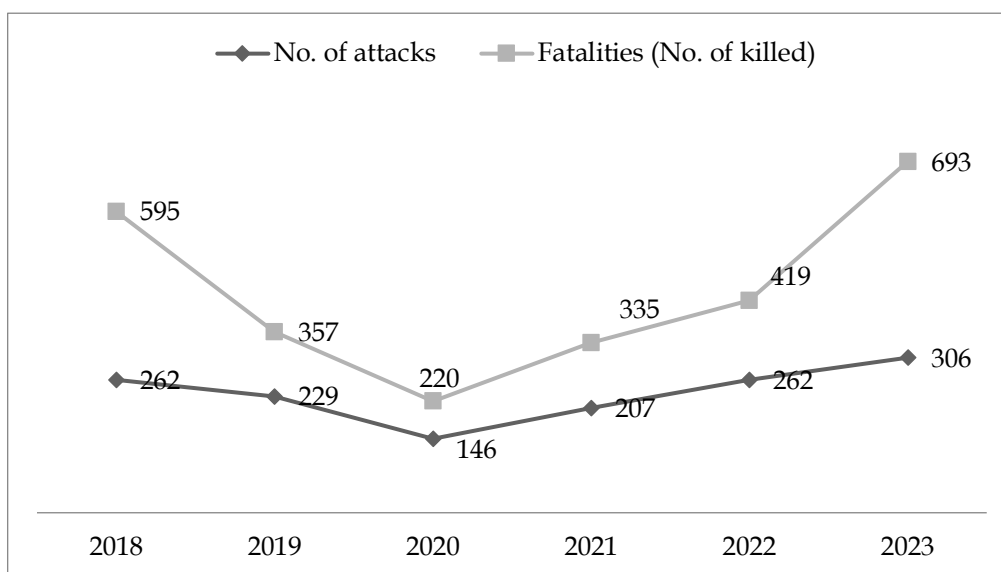
³² For complete report, visit: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/394/29/PDF/N2239429.pdf?OpenElement>

³³ Mumin Ahmadi, et al., "Exclusive: Taliban puts Tajik militants partially in charge of Afghanistan's northern border," RFERL, July 27, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-tajik-militants-border/31380071.html>

³⁴ Thirty-third report of the UNSC's Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team released on January 23, 2024. The report can be downloaded here: < <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4035877?v=pdf> >

³⁵ Interview by PIPS in Quetta on September 8, 2023.

³⁶ For details on fallout from Afghanistan on Pakistan's security and militant landscape, please see: Ahmed Ali, "Fallout of Afghan situation and Pakistan's policy responses," Pak Institute for Peace Studies, 2022, <https://www.pakpips.com/article/7039>

Chart 1: Comparison of Terrorist Attacks and Fatalities in Pakistan (2018 - 2023)³⁷

Similarly, according to data derived from Pak Institute for Peace Studies' digital database on security incidents in Pakistan, during the first two years since the Taliban takeover (i.e., August 2021 to July 2023), the number of terrorist attacks in Pakistan posted a phenomenal increase of 64 percent, as compared to corresponding two years before the Taliban takeover. The number of people killed in these attacks increased by 73 percent. Apparently, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces have witnessed a marked impact of the Afghan situation in terms of terrorist violence, where the number of attacks (during these two years) surged by 84 percent and 65 percent, respectively (See Table 1). These two provinces border on Afghanistan and have been host to the Pakistani Taliban militancy and Baloch nationalist insurgency, respectively.

Table 1: Terrorist attacks in Pakistan in 2 years since the Taliban takeover³⁸

Region	Aug. 2019 to Jul. 2021 (2 years)		Aug. 2021 to Jul. 2023 (About 2 years till Jul 8)		% Change ³⁹	
	No. of Attacks	Killed	No. of Attacks	Killed	No. of Attacks	Killed
KP	173	256	318	571	84%↑	123%↑
Balochistan	105	200	173	251	65%↑	25%↑
Punjab & Islamabad	15	26	11	18	20%↓	31%↓

³⁷ Data and statistics are derived from Pak Institute for Peace Studies' digital database on conflict and insecurity: <www.pakpips.com.app/database>

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ ↑ and ↓ represent increase and decrease, respectively, from the corresponding period of previous year(s), as given at the table.

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Region	Aug. 2019 to Jul. 2021 (2 years)		Aug. 2021 to Jul. 2023 (About 2 years till Jul 8)		% Change ³⁹	
	No. of Attacks	Killed	No. of Attacks	Killed	No. of Attacks	Killed
Sindh	24	22	17	30	12%↓	36%↑
GB & AJK	0	0	1	0	-	-
Total	317	504	520	870	64%↑	73%↑

The year 2023, in particular, witnessed an upsurge of 65 percent in terrorism-related fatalities in Pakistan, which suggests that militants perpetrated high-impact attacks more frequently as compared to previous years. The key actors of terrorist violence were also more pronounced in the year 2023; over 82 percent of the terrorism-related deaths resulted from attacks perpetrated by three major groups including the TTP and its subsidiaries, IS-K, and the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA).

While the attacks by the banned BLA mainly concentrated in Balochistan, the TTP and its subsidiaries such as Tehrik-e-Jihad Pakistan (TJP), as well as IS-K expanded their areas of operations in 2023 from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to Balochistan, Punjab and Karachi.

The banned TTP has established its shadow provinces or chapters for almost all regions of the country and has been using modern equipment including night vision sniper rifles in its attacks. After the TTP, the second highest number of terrorism-related casualties in Pakistan in 2023 was caused by the attacks perpetrated by the IS-K.⁴⁰

- **Encouragement for militant groups**

When the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan, government officials, retired military officers, and hard-line clerics in Pakistan celebrated the militant group's return to power. However, observers warned that the Taliban's forcible takeover of Afghanistan could galvanize Pakistan's own violent insurgency. Those fears have now been realized as the TTP has intensified its attacks.⁴¹

The victory of the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2021 has energized the Pakistani militant groups. And while the Afghan government denies allegations that it is providing shelter to these groups, security analysts believe the success of the Afghan Taliban has on particular emboldened its Pakistani counterpart, i.e. Pakistani Taliban, and encouraged it to fully embrace the same playbook.⁴²

Moreover, the military equipment left behind during the American withdrawal from Afghanistan has fallen into the hands of the Pakistani Taliban. The equipment, including a wide variety of items,

⁴⁰ Pak Institute for Peace Studies, *Pakistan Security Report 2023* (Islamabad: Narratives, January 2024).

⁴¹ Daud Khattak, "Taliban takeover in Afghanistan bolsters Pakistan's insurgency", Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, January 13, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghan-taliban-bolsters-pakistan-insurgency/31652664.html>

⁴² Haq Nawaz Khan and Rick Noack, "Taliban success emboldens Pakistani militants, and deadly attacks surge", *The Washington Post*, November 10, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/11/10/taliban-pakistan-afghanistan-ttp/>

from night vision goggles to firearms, is now emerging as a new challenge for Pakistan as it has enhanced the fighting capabilities of the Pakistani Taliban.⁴³

In addition to Islamist groups, Baloch insurgent factions, whose leadership is suspected to be based in Afghanistan and Iran, have also been emboldened by the Taliban's capture of power. These groups have been discovered in possession of similarly advanced weaponry. In recent months, Baloch insurgent factions have executed several significant, high-impact attacks, which will be detailed later.

On the other hand, the Afghan Taliban have been unwilling to crack down on the TTP, its close ideological and organizational ally. Dr. Qibla Ayaz, the head of the Council of Islamic Ideology, during his visit to Kabul early September 2023, observed that the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan has emboldened the TTP, and that the two groups are closely aligned. He also believes that the TTP expects support from the Afghan Taliban, given their past relationship.⁴⁴

Pakistani law enforcement officials suggest that following the conclusion of the war in Afghanistan, the Taliban, particularly the Haqqanis, encouraged certain members to operate within Pakistan's former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (ex-FATA), alongside the TTP. These individuals are highly skilled, and as cited earlier, have access to weapons left behind by NATO forces in Afghanistan. Some Haqqani fighters have indeed joined the TTP, posing a significant threat. A Counter-Terrorism Department (CTD) official disclosed that Taliban or Haqqani fighters have been implicated in numerous terrorist attacks within Pakistan. It's worth noting that not all Taliban fighters within the TTP are defectors; some may still maintain allegiance to the Afghan Taliban.⁴⁵

Indeed, multiple sources suggest that the banned TTP is getting significant backing and support from Al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban. That not only includes the provision of arms and equipment but also active on-ground support for the banned TTP's operations against Pakistan. Moreover, TTP members and their families are said to receive regular aid packages from the Afghan Taliban, signifying a deeper level of support.⁴⁶

The deteriorating security situation in Balochistan province has also been linked with Afghanistan. Analysts believe that the Baloch insurgents have used more sophisticated weapons and tactics recently, a development which they argue is largely linked to Afghanistan.⁴⁷

Meanwhile, over recent months and years, major or high-impact attacks by Baloch insurgents, once rare and sporadic, have grown increasingly frequent, indicating at the increasing intensity of the Baloch insurgency. Notably, in January 2024 the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) orchestrated a significant coordinated assault involving gunfire and explosives in the Mach area of Bolan. Although security forces successfully neutralized the attackers before they could cause significant loss of life or damage to installations, yet this incident marked a notable escalation in violence, reminiscent of previous BLA attacks on Frontier Corps (FC) camps in Panjgur earlier in 2022. Later

⁴³ Munir Ahmed, "Pakistani premier claims US military equipment left behind in Afghanistan is now in militant hands," AP News, September 4, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/pakistan-us-military-equipment-afghanistan-taliban-147275573d2dc48e4f7343626094a51b>

⁴⁴ Interview recorded by PIPS on October 7, 2023. Dr Qibla Ayaz was part of the delegation of the religious scholars who visited Kabul and meet with several top leaders of the Taliban and discussed the issues related to the TTP.

⁴⁵ PIPS' interview with Sohail Khalid, DIG CTD KP, in Peshawar on September 4, 2023.

⁴⁶ Baqir Sajjad Syed, "TTP backed by Al Qaeda, Afghan Taliban: UN," *Dawn*, February 1, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1810228/ttp-backed-by-al-qaeda-afghan-taliban-un>

⁴⁷ PIPS' group interview with journalists Syed Arfeen, Riaz Sohail, and Fayaz Naich in Karachi in September 2023.

in March, few more major, coordinated attacks took place in Gwadar and Turbat, which could have caused significant casualties and losses had the security forces not responded well in time and effectively. The attacks respectively targeted the Gwadar Port Authority (GPA) Colony, and PNS Siddique naval base in Turbat. The Majeed Brigade, a special wing of the banned Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), was responsible for these fedayeen attacks. The BLA has become a significant terrorist and security concern in Balochistan, posing a threat to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Chinese economic engagements in the region.

- **Cross-border incursions & border insecurity**

Insecurity and violence at the Pak-Afghan border have been growing since the Taliban took power in Afghanistan. While the situation at the Chaman border (Balochistan) normally remains tense, some major cross-border attacks from Afghanistan also happened in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2023, such as the border incursion by the TTP from Kunar in Afghanistan to Chitral district in Pakistan on September 6, 2023. The same day border forces of both the countries clashed at the Torkham border crossing.

Importantly, in the past, or during Ghani regime, most of the cross-border attacks from Afghanistan were carried out by the TTP or other militant groups, but now many of such incidents involve Afghan border forces under the Taliban regime.

In 2023, seven incidents happened at or from across the country's border with Afghanistan including six in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and one in Balochistan, killing 14 people and injuring 17 others. These seven incidents only entail the border happenings and don't include the incursions by the TTP or other militants wherein they crossed the border and carried out attacks inside Pakistan.⁴⁸

The leadership of Pakistani militant groups, including the TTP, operates from Afghanistan, enjoying freedom of movement to plan and execute cross-border attacks into Pakistan. As previously mentioned, a significant number of recent suicide bombers in Pakistan originated from Afghanistan, likely facilitated by the Taliban. These Pakistani Taliban groups, including the TTP, maintain training camps and organizational structures within Afghanistan. They have adopted a similar organizational model and operational approach to that of the Afghan Taliban.⁴⁹

As the terrorists' cross-border attacks continue, it is also adding to Pak-Afghan bilateral tensions. For instance, a group of Hafiz Gul Bahadur terrorists martyred seven army soldiers including two officers in North Waziristan on March 16, 2024. Following the attack, Pakistani officials issued strict President Zardari in particular vowed to avenge the deaths of Pakistani soldiers in North Waziristan. The development was followed by Pakistan's airstrikes inside Afghanistan two days later. Initially, several pro-Taliban sources reported Pakistani airstrikes in Afghanistan's Paktika and Khost provinces. These reports confirmed the deaths of at least five people. Later, Pakistan's Foreign Office said Pakistan's operation targeted the Hafiz Gul Bahadur group in Afghanistan, which is responsible for several attacks inside Pakistan. "Pakistan...always prioritized dialogue and cooperation [with Kabul] to confront the terrorist threat. We have repeatedly urged the Afghan authorities to take concrete and effective action to ensure that the Afghan soil is not used as a staging ground for terrorism against Pakistan. We have also called on them to deny safe havens to the TTP and to hand over its leadership to Pakistan." The Afghan Taliban also confirmed the

⁴⁸ Pak Institute for Peace Studies, *Pakistan Security Report 2023* (Islamabad: Narratives, January 2024).

⁴⁹ PIPS' interview with Sohail Khalid, DIG CTD KP, in Peshawar on September 4, 2023.

attacks, and Kabul targeted “bases of Pakistani security forces” across the border with heavy weapons.⁵⁰

- **Refugee influx**

After the withdrawal of US and NATO forces from Afghanistan and the Taliban's assumption of power in August 2021, Pakistan adopted a restrictive approach towards Afghan refugees. This stance stemmed from two main motivations: first, a desire to prevent the international community from shifting responsibility for war-torn Afghanistan solely onto Pakistan, and second, concerns over Pakistan's economic vulnerabilities and border security. Pakistan not only displayed reluctance towards the influx of more refugees but also barred the UNHCR from using terms such as "new arrivals" or "new refugees."

Nevertheless, a substantial number of Afghan refugees continued to cross the Pakistani border. Between January 2021 and February 2022, UNHCR documented 117,547 arrivals from Afghanistan in Pakistan, with a notable peak of 35,289 individuals in August 2021. By the end of 2022, another count indicated that over 300,000 Afghans had sought refuge in Pakistan following the Taliban's takeover of Kabul.⁵¹ However, Pakistani authorities initially estimated that only about 60,000 to 70,000 Afghans had entered Pakistan during this period. Yet, this number continued to increase in subsequent months, and according to another count, it surged to 600,000.⁵²

The majority of the new Afghan refugees have settled in Quetta, Peshawar, and Islamabad. Persian-speaking Afghans with Tajik and Uzbek ethnic backgrounds tend to gravitate towards the Rawalpindi/Islamabad region, while ethnic Pashtun Afghans predominantly reside in Quetta and Peshawar. Approximately 40 percent of the new Afghan refugees in Pakistan originate from Kabul, while others come from various regions in northern Afghanistan, such as Sheberghan and Sar-e-Pul, as well as the southern city of Jalalabad.⁵³

Pakistan's border security concerns had started to grow long before the Taliban's assumption of power in Kabul. From early 2017 to January 2022, the country reportedly fenced approximately 90 percent of its border with Afghanistan, making formal and informal border crossings much more difficult. Nevertheless, due to the ‘porous’ nature of the border, undocumented crossings have continued to occur.

Before Pakistan initiated recent repatriation of the Afghan refugees in the country, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that as of October 2023, there were 3.7 million Afghans in Pakistan, among them some 700,000 Afghans who fled to Pakistan after the Taliban takeover on August 15, 2021. Many of this last group were encouraged to apply from Pakistan for resettlement programs in the United States, Canada, Germany, and other countries. While 200,000 have been resettled, others have been left in limbo. Afghan women and girls have

⁵⁰ Iftikhar A. Khan and Umer Farooq, "Pakistan ends restraint, bombs militant bases in Afghanistan," *Dawn*, March 19, 2024.

⁵¹ Freedom Network of Pakistan, "Afghan refugees in Pakistan: lives in limbo," 2022, <<https://www.fnpc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Afghan-Refugees-in-Pakistan-Lives-in-Lombo.pdf>>

⁵² Caroline Gluck, "Forced returnees from Pakistan deepen Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis," UNHCR, November 17, 2023, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/forced-returns-pakistan-deepen-afghanistan-s-humanitarian-crisis>

⁵³ Urooj Jafri, "Afghan refugees and border control: Pakistan's challenges and policy options," Pak Institute for Peace Studies, Sep 29, 2022, <https://www.pakpips.com/article/7041>

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often faced greater barriers to obtaining asylum, as destination countries have often prioritized assisting Afghans – overwhelmingly men – who contributed to their military efforts.⁵⁴

Pakistan started deporting Afghan refugees in October 2023,⁵⁵ citing security and economic constraints as primary reasons. The interior ministry informed the upper house of parliament on January 2, 2024, that data of 1.45 million registered refugees was updated and expanded through the issuance of smart identity cards that contain basic information, including biometric data, and are compatible with the local systems. The House was also informed that 541,210 illegal immigrants had been repatriated so far under the government's deportation drive against illegal aliens.⁵⁶

Meanwhile, Pakistan is preparing for the second phase of its repatriation campaign, aiming to return nearly one million 'documented' Afghan refugees. District authorities and police have been assigned the task of mapping and collecting data on their whereabouts nationwide. While no specific start date has been announced, media sources suggest the campaign may begin in early to mid-summer pending federal government approval. According to UNHCR, there are a total of 2.18 million documented Afghan refugees in Pakistan, including 1.3 million with Proof of Registration (PoR) cards from the 2006-07 census and an additional 880,000 with Afghan Citizen Cards (ACCs) obtained in 2017. Following the Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan in August 2021, another influx of Afghans into Pakistan occurred, estimated between 600,000 and 800,000 individuals, some of whom possess valid travel documents but face an uncertain future.⁵⁷

It seems that the Pakistani government is persistent in its campaign to expel illegal foreigners, which may further strain its bilateral relations with the Afghan Taliban regime. While Pakistan argues that illegally staying Afghans pose economic and security risks, the Afghan government maintains that these migrants are unrelated to the violence perpetrated by the banned TTP, a Pakistani Taliban group whose leadership finds sanctuary in Afghanistan. Clearly, the issues surrounding the banned TTP and Afghan refugees have become significant points of contention in Pak-Afghan relations.

Some observers assert that Pakistan's decision to repatriate illegal Afghans reflects its frustration with the de facto Afghan regime's lack of cooperation on the TTP issue and its increasing attacks within Pakistan. Despite hosting Afghan refugees for decades, Pakistan has failed to leverage this factor to win the hearts and minds of the Afghan people. Many Afghans, including the Taliban and returning refugees, view Pakistan as a source of instability in Afghanistan.

The current impasse over refugee, border, and TTP issues will only exacerbate Afghan grievances against Pakistan. The Afghan Taliban require domestic legitimacy and cannot afford to ignore prevailing anti-Pakistan sentiments among the populace. While Pakistan hopes for the Taliban to act against the TTP under pressure, any such move would likely be tactical and fall short of resolving deeper inter-state conflicts or the threat of terrorist violence within Pakistan.

⁵⁴ "Pakistan: Drop threat to deport Afghans", Human Rights Watch, October 12, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/10/12/pakistan-drop-threat-deport-afghans>

⁵⁵ Asif Shahzad, "Pakistan orders illegal immigrants, including 1.73 mln Afghans, to leave", Reuters, October 3, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistan-orders-all-illegal-immigrants-leave-after-suicide-bombings-2023-10-03/>

⁵⁶ Iftikhar A. Khan, "TTP influx continues in merged districts, Senate told," *Dawn*, January 3, 2024.

⁵⁷ Ismail Khan, "Second phase of Afghan repatriation in the works," *Dawn*, March 25, 2024.

- **Fears of ideological radicalization**

The resurgence of groups like the TTP following the Afghan Taliban's takeover of Kabul has sparked widespread fear of ideological radicalization in Pakistan. Extremism in the country manifests in various forms, and it's crucial to acknowledge that the concern extends beyond Deobandi or Salafi extremism alone. Barelvi extremism also demands significant attention. A prime example of this is the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), a distinctive religious-political party in the country. What distinguishes the TLP is its exceptional ability to mobilize supporters, operating more akin to a pressure group with significant influence on the nation's political landscape.

Extremist narratives in Pakistan encompass a wide range of perspectives, which facilitates their broad dissemination and makes them especially appealing to a diverse youth audience. The lack of effective counterextremism measures in Pakistan presents a substantial threat, perpetuating a dangerous cycle of terrorism driven by extremism. This scenario poses grave risks to Pakistan's internal security.⁵⁸

The dissemination of ideological narratives by groups like the TTP and IS-K has increased recently, with these and other militant organizations consistently publishing material and engaging in online propaganda campaigns. Additionally, supporters of various militant groups are present within Pakistan's extensive religious discourse, including madrassas, which closely monitor developments in militant and ideological spheres. Baloch insurgent groups have also sought to garner support from the Baloch populace by highlighting issues such as enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings.

In a country like Pakistan, where governance and rule of law issues persist, people, especially the youth, are more susceptible to militant ideological influence and may be vulnerable to radicalization.

- **Regional dynamics & security threats**

While the Afghan situation continues to weigh heavily on Pakistan's efforts of pursuing 'economic diplomacy' in the world, it is also affecting Pakistan's efforts to connect in the emerging regional geo-economics including through pursuing the projects like China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). As things stand in Afghanistan now, these are not helping in any way Pakistan's efforts to deal with the militant groups threatening the security of Pakistan and foreign engagements in the country including economic and humanitarian. Pakistan has in recent years emphasized economic security as a key component of its national security. Insecurity and instability in Afghanistan and its fallout impact on Pakistan will have thus severe consequences for Pakistan's efforts to achieve economic security.

The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan has indeed transformed the security landscape of the whole region. The Taliban's support for regional insurgent groups and providing refuge to them within Afghanistan remains a significant concern for the global community, especially regional countries. Despite engaging with the Taliban, these nations closely monitor the status of terrorist groups under the regime's control, consistently expressing their concerns to senior Taliban officials.

⁵⁸ Qurat-ul-Ain Shabbir and Moneeb Mir, "Pakistan's Never-ending Battle Against Terrorism", *The Diplomat*, October 6, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/10/pakistans-never-ending-battle-against-terrorism/>

In addition to Pakistan, Tajikistan has consistently voiced its concerns regarding the escalating terrorist threats stemming from Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Russia has also expressed apprehension over terrorism originating from Afghanistan on several occasions. The Russian ambassador to Tajikistan highlighted that terrorist groups made multiple attempts in 2023 to infiltrate from Afghanistan into Tajikistan. He noted the lack of progress in the Taliban's commitments to secure borders with neighboring countries, resulting in a surge in industrial drug trafficking. Furthermore, an Iranian media outlet reported that Jaish ul-Adl maintains a presence in Afghanistan with support from the Taliban, benefitting from both logistical and political backing from the group.⁵⁹

The immediate neighbors of Afghanistan are increasingly concerned about the regional security implications following the Taliban's seizure of Kabul. On April 13, 2023 foreign ministers of Afghanistan's neighbours met in Samarkand to discuss the situation in Afghanistan. These officials, representing China, Russia, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, noted that the Taliban had links with some extremist groups that "pose a serious threat to regional and global security". They in particular highlighted Al-Qaeda, Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement, Baloch Liberation Army, Jundallah, Jaish al-Adl, Jamaat Ansarullah and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. Meanwhile, there have also been reports about some senior leaders and members of Jaish-e-Mohammad and Lashkar-e-Taiba being trained and equipped inside Afghanistan.⁶⁰

On the other hand, General Kurilla, the commander of the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) in the Middle East, recently expressed concerns about the existence of safe havens in Afghanistan for extremist militant groups. He emphasized that such safe havens increase the risk of their activities escalating and could potentially lead to regional conflicts. General Kurilla voiced worries over the Afghan Taliban's inability or reluctance to control these extremist groups, highlighting the potential destabilization of Central and South Asia as a consequence.⁶¹

- **Impact on Pakistan's CT efforts**

The resurgence of terrorism in Pakistan after the Taliban's coming into power in Afghanistan has bent Pakistan's already fragile counterterrorism infrastructure, heavily impacting the country's counterterrorism efforts.

Experts believe that Pakistan's counterterrorism and extremism frameworks are outdated, failing to address evolving threats. Despite successful operations from 2009 to 2019, violence reduction led to complacency, allowing radicalization to persist and threats to mutate. The TTP has grown strategically, utilizing social media and unity among jihadist factions. IS-K and Baloch insurgents pose additional challenges. However, policy adjustments have been lacking, with peace talks with

⁵⁹ Amin Kawa, "The Taliban promises and neighbors' despair: Terrorist groups threaten the region from Afghan soil," *Hasht-e Subh*, December 19, 2023, <https://8am.media/eng/the-taliban-promises-and-neighbors-despair-terrorist-groups-threaten-the-region-from-afghan-soil/#~:text=In%20the%20latest%20development%2C%20Semyon,this%20year%20to%20infiltrate%20Tajikistan.>

⁶⁰ Amitabha Roychowdhury, "Afghan Taliban shelters terror outfits", *NewsClick*, July 15, 2023, <https://www.newsclick.in/afghan-taliban-shelters-terror-outfits>

⁶¹ Fidel Rahmati, "Taliban's indifference to militants poses threat to Central Asian security: US General", *The Khaama Press*, March 11, 2024, <https://www.khaama.com/talibans-indifference-to-militants-poses-threat-to-central-asian-security-us-general/>

the TTP undermining prior progress. Limited resources and reduced international focus post-Afghanistan withdrawal hinder effective response.⁶²

- **Growing threats to CPEC and its security**

No one has yet claimed responsibility for the heinous attack resulting in the tragic deaths of five Chinese nationals and their Pakistani driver in the Besham area of Shangla on March 26, 2024. Besham is situated on the border of Shangla and Kohistan districts, an area with multiple CPEC-related activities and projects, notably the Dasu hydropower project. Hundreds of Chinese workers are currently engaged in these projects. Chinese nationals working on the Dasu Dam were previously targeted in this region in August 2021, with many attributing the attack to a collaboration between certain TTP affiliate and Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP).

The TTP is the first group to distance itself from the attack. However, this should not absolve the TTP of responsibility until another group, such as IS-K, explicitly claims it. Several reasons support this stance. Firstly, in the wake of recent tensions sparked by Pakistani airstrikes against TTP and affiliates' hideouts in Afghanistan, it was widely anticipated that the TTP would retaliate with a major, high-profile attack within Pakistan. Indeed, targeting Chinese nationals in Pakistan invariably elevates the profile of an attack and thrusts the issue into the international spotlight, thus bringing more pressure on Pakistan. Secondly, the TTP's denial lacks credibility, given its recent pattern of avoiding claims for attacks perpetrated by itself or its affiliates, including Tehrik-e-Jihad Pakistan, Ansar al-Jihad, and the Hafiz Gul Bahadur group. Thirdly, the entire area where the attack occurred (Kohistan and Swat) falls under the influence of the TTP and its affiliates, making it challenging for other groups to operate and organize logistics for such a significant attack. Finally, the TTP remains a key ally of anti-China groups such as TIP and Uyghurs, further underscoring its potential involvement. However, it may never claim such attacks due to possible pressure from Afghan Taliban government, which may not afford to annoy China because of the diplomatic and economic support the latter has been extending to Afghanistan.

The second scenario involves the potential involvement of IS-K, which has been actively seeking to solidify its presence and operations in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Central Asia, and beyond in recent times. If IS-K were responsible for the attack, it would likely claim responsibility, as it faces no constraints in doing so to avoid pressure from the Afghan Taliban or the international community. In this scenario, the attack could be viewed as part of a series of IS-K attacks, following the pattern seen in the recent Moscow attack, aimed at establishing itself as a significant terrorist entity. Notably, IS-K is known for its vehement opposition to China and its engagements in Afghanistan, as well as in other regions.

Overall, as cited earlier, unfolding events suggest that Taliban-led Afghanistan is evolving into a new focal point for terrorist groups posing threats to the region and beyond. The influential leadership of the Taliban, including its emir Hibatullah Akhundzada, seems indifferent to regional and global concerns and is instead focused on advancing their ideological objectives of Islamization and other conservative pursuits.

For Pakistan, the Shangla attack, alongside recent incidents like those in Gwadar and Turbat, represents a significant setback on multiple fronts. Firstly, it undermines Pakistan's endeavors to revive CPEC and draw international investment, dealing a blow to its economic prospects.

⁶² Abdul Basit, "Pakistan's outdated counter-terrorism framework requires major revamp", *The Diplomat*, October 2, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/10/pakistans-outdated-counterterrorism-framework-requires-major-revamp/>

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Secondly, it will increase tensions with Afghanistan, which could have adverse implications for border security and internal stability. Thirdly, it has the potential to exacerbate internal insecurity and compound existing politico-economic challenges.

Major or high impact attacks by the Baloch insurgents, which used to be quite rare and sporadic, have become quite frequent in recent months and years. It hints at the increasing intensity of the Baloch insurgency. Few major, coordinated attacks took place in Gwadar and Turbat in March 2024, which could have caused significant casualties and losses had the security forces not responded well in time and effectively. A group of eight terrorists attempted to breach the Gwadar Port Authority (GPA) Colony but was repelled by security forces. The Pakistan Army responded swiftly, engaging and eliminating all eight terrorists in a firefight. Two soldiers, Sepoy Bahar Khan and Sepoy Imran Ali, lost their lives during the intense exchange of fire. Similarly, a Balochistan Frontier Corps soldier was martyred, and four terrorists were killed as security forces repelled an attack on PNS Siddique naval base in Turbat. The Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) reported that terrorists attempted the attack, but it was swiftly thwarted by the troops, ensuring the safety of personnel and assets. During the joint clearance operation, all four terrorists were eliminated, with 24-year-old Sepoy Noman Fareed sacrificing his life. PNS Siddique is one of the largest naval air stations in the country.

The Majeed Brigade, a special wing of the banned Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), was responsible for these fedayeen attacks. The BLA has become a significant terrorist and security concern in Balochistan, posing a threat to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Chinese economic engagements in the regions.

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3. Overview of escalating terrorist violence in Pakistan

The militancy and terrorist violence in Pakistan have taken a new turn in recent years, in particular since the Taliban's takeover of Kabul. The role of the Taliban government in Afghanistan notwithstanding, Pakistan's negotiation bid with the TTP and dwindling political focus on countering terrorism due to persisting political and economic crises has apparently emboldened the banned TTP and others to regroup and escalate terrorist violence in Pakistan. Overall, terrorist violence has rapidly been picking up and intensifying in parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces, besides few major attacks reported from Punjab and Karachi.

For instance, the outlawed TTP is adopting operational and political tactics akin to those used by the Afghan Taliban against the US-led NATO forces in Afghanistan. This strategic shift has led to a surge in lethal terrorist attacks by the group in Pakistan. The TTP is also trying to showcase its nationalistic credentials and capitalize on any opportunity to criticize and vilify the country's security establishment. A case in point is the January 2024 Jamshed Dashti incident, where he accused security institutions of subjecting his family to torture for political victimization and garnering attention on social media. The TTP expressed solidarity with him.

Similarly, the TTP frequently issues statements in support of Baloch families of missing persons and victims of extrajudicial killings. By bringing attention to such cases, the TTP seeks to underscore the 'righteousness' of its struggle against the security apparatus. While the TTP's impact remains relatively limited thus far, there's a significant likelihood of its expanding influence within marginalized communities and religious institutions.

In an effort to portray itself as a real anti-establishment armed resistance group, the TTP is purposefully steering clear of sectarian divisions and is refraining from sectarian attacks.

Meanwhile, the Islamic State of Khurasan (IS-K) is capitalizing on this particular void left by the TTP by embracing a more rigidly religious stance, targeting religious and sectarian communities in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) has also been emerging as a critical threat to Pakistan's security for the past few years. After the TTP, the second highest number of terrorism-related casualties in Pakistan in 2023 was caused by the attacks perpetrated by the IS-K. In KP, one of the IS-K's main targets has been Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam leaders, mainly in Bajaur. The group also carried out a deadly suicide attack in Mastung on September 30, 2023, in which 63 people were killed. The group also perpetrated few major attacks Balochistan and KP during February 2024, when general elections were held in Pakistan.

Among the prominent actors in the terrorist landscape, Al-Qaeda remains largely dormant or intentionally keeping a low profile while continuing to back its longstanding ally, the TTP, in its terrorist endeavors.

Over the past few years, the Baloch insurgents have also resorted to high-impact or major attacks mainly in Balochistan and occasionally in Karachi, the provincial capital of Sindh. Besides mainly hitting security forces, political leaders and CPEC-related targets, Baloch insurgents also killed several alleged spies or collaborators as well as non-Baloch settlers and workers in different areas of the province. They see all these perceived targets as part of the larger federal scheme to exploit the provincial resources.

As previously mentioned, for the third consecutive year, Pakistan witnessed a rise in terrorist attacks in 2023. This increase in terrorist violence in Pakistan corresponded with the Taliban's ascent to power in neighboring Afghanistan, starting from 2021. Otherwise, the incidence of terrorist violence in Pakistan had been declining since 2014.

Table 2: Comparison of Terrorist Attacks and Fatalities in Pakistan (2014-23)⁶³

Year	No. of Terrorist Attacks (%Change)	No. of Killed (% Change)
2014	30%↓	30%↓
2015	48%↓	38%↓
2016	28%↓	12%↓
2017	16%↓	10%↓
2018	29%↓	27%↓
2019	13%↓	40%↓
2020	36%↓	38%↓
2021	42%↑	52%↑
2022	27%↑	25%↑
2023	17%↑	65%↑

3.1 Terrorist violence in Pakistan in 2023⁶⁴

As illustrated in Section 2, the frequency of terrorist attacks in Pakistan has been increasing since August 2021 when the Taliban took power in Kabul. In 2022, Pakistan experienced a 27 percent increase in the incidence of terrorist violence, and in 2023, the terrorist attacks further surged by 17 percent.

A total of 306 terrorist attacks took place in Pakistan in the year – including 23 suicide bombings – which killed 693 people and injured 1,124 others. These attacks marked an increase of 17 percent from the year before, and the number of people killed in these attacks represented an increase of 65 percent from those killed in similar attacks during the previous year.

As many as 330 personnel of security forces and law enforcement agencies were martyred in the reported terrorist attacks in 2023 including 26 FC men, 176 policemen, 110 army officials, 11 Levies, five unspecified paramilitary soldiers, and two Rangers; another 518 personnel of security and law enforcement agencies were also injured. Similarly, 260 civilians lost their lives and another 559 were wounded in these attacks. Meanwhile 103 militants were killed and another 47 were injured, either in suicide blasts they perpetrated, or in security forces' retaliatory fire following some attacks.

Religiously inspired militant groups such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and other local Taliban groups including Tehrik-e-Jihad Pakistan (TJP) and Hafiz Gul Bahadur group, as well as

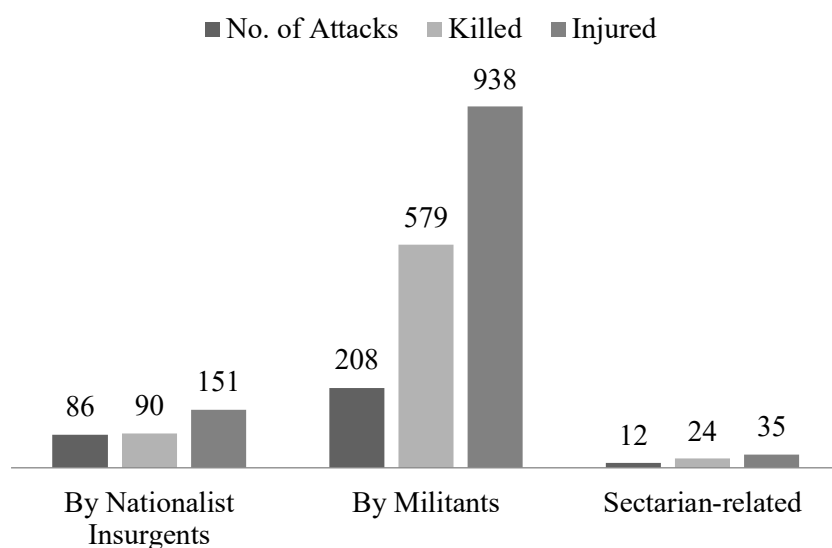
⁶³ ↑and↓ represent increase and decrease, respectively, from previous year.

⁶⁴ Most of the data and statistics for this section are derived from Pak Institute for Peace Studies' digital database and Pakistan Security Report 2023.

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Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K), etc., perpetrated a combined total of 208 terrorist attacks – compared to 179 in previous year – which killed 579 people and injured 938 others. Different Baloch and Sindhi nationalist insurgent groups carried out 86 attacks – as compared to 79 such attacks in 2022 – which claimed 90 lives and wounded another 151 people. Meanwhile, compared to four in 2022, 12 sectarian-related terrorist attacks were recorded in 2023 that claimed 24 lives and inflicted injuries on another 35 people.

Chart 2: Classification of Terrorist Attacks in Pakistan in 2023



As in previous years, security and law enforcement personnel were the prime target of terrorist attacks in 2023. As many as 205 attacks in 2023, or about 67 percent of the total recorded attacks in the year, targeted personnel, vehicles, convoys, and posts or facilities of security and law enforcement agencies. Civilians were apparently hit in 19 attacks, while another 10 attacks targeted polio vaccination teams and their security escorts, mainly police. Meanwhile terrorists perpetrated nine attacks each against alleged spies/collaborators, and government officials/institutions/state symbols. Another nine attacks hit Sunni religious leaders and community, and five terrorist attacks targeted members of Shia community. Baloch insurgents also targeted non-Baloch workers and settlers in Balochistan in a total of five attacks. Other sporadic targets hit by the terrorists in 2023 are given at table below.

Table 3: Targets Hit in Terrorist Attacks in 2023

Targets	No. of attacks	Killed	Injured
Security/law enforcement agencies (personnel, convoys, posts)	205	434	699
Education/institutions/teachers	2	0	0
Non-Bloch settlers/workers	5	16	12
Gas pipelines	2	0	0
Govt. officials/institutions/symbols	9	2	11

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Power pylons/cell phone towers	2	0	0
Tribal elders	4	5	2
Civilians	19	32	61
Shia religious scholars/community	5	18	32
Worship places/shrines/madrassas	2	71	96
Sunni religious leaders/community	8	9	3
Political leaders/workers	7	72	149
Christian community/Church	1	1	0
Sikh community	3	3	1
Alleged spy or collaborator	9	12	1
Health/polio workers, security escorts	10	5	11
CPEC/workers/Chinese	1	2	0
Railway tracks / trains	4	1	22
Development, exploration projects, companies, workers	3	6	17
Non-Sindhi settler/worker	1	1	0
Census team/security escort	3	3	7
Total	306	693	1,124

Besides perpetrating 23 suicide and *fedayee* attacks, the terrorists mainly used direct infantry fire in 160 attacks, improvised explosive devices or IEDs of multiple types in 65 attacks, and hand grenades in 38 attacks. The terrorists also used other attack tactics, though less frequently, including 12 coordinated gun-and-bomb attacks, three rocket attacks, three terrorist acts of sabotage and lynching, and one incident each of mortar attack and beheading.

About 93 percent of the total recorded terrorist attacks in Pakistan in 2023 concentrated in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa faced the highest number of attacks for any one region of the country.

Table 4: Terrorist Attacks in Pakistan in 2023

Region	No. of Attacks	Killed	Injured
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	174	422	782
Balochistan	110	229	282
Punjab	6	16	8
Karachi	14	16	26
Sindh (excluding Karachi)	1	0	0
Gilgit-Baltistan	1	10	26
Total	306	693	1,124

3.2 Critical terrorist threats and actors

More than 20 militant groups, falling in three main categories of (i) religiously inspired, (ii) sub-nationalist insurgent, and (iii) violent sectarian, remained active in Pakistan in the year 2023. However, the major actors of terrorist violence in the country were these three critical groups: the banned TTP and its subsidiaries such as Tehrik-e-Jihad Pakistan; Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K); and Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA). These three groups carried out over 78 percent of the total terrorist attacks recorded in the country in the year under review. Similarly, over 82 percent of terrorism-related deaths were caused by the attacks perpetrated by these three groups. While the

attacks by the BLA were largely concentrated in Balochistan, the attacks by the TTP/TJP were recorded across four provinces of Pakistan but a bulk of them concentrated in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The IS-K was almost equally active in parts of KP and Balochistan.

The banned TTP had started to regroup in Pakistan in 2020 and in particular after the Afghan Taliban took power in Kabul in August 2021. The Taliban-mediated talks between Pakistan and the TTP failed to yield anything, and the TTP announced an end to a months-long ceasefire in November 2022. Although the group had been carrying out attacks during the ceasefire months, too, however, it intensified terrorist violence inside Pakistan afterwards and resorted to high-impact attacks such as the Peshawar Police Lines blast in January 2023. Secondly, having initially focused on southern and central districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa the group gradually increased its terrorist violence in other parts of the country, away from KP, mainly in the Pashtun belt of Balochistan. In June 2023, the banned TTP also announced new formations or administrative units for Balochistan and Punjab. The number of TTP shadow provinces has reached 12 in the country, out of which seven are in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, one in Gilgit-Baltistan, and two each in Balochistan and Punjab.⁶⁵

Some key TTP affiliates and new entrants have also become active. For one, a new group Tehrik-e-Jihad Pakistan emerged in the year 2023, which many believe is a subsidiary or smokescreen group of the TTP. The TJP perpetrated some high impact attacks in KP and Balochistan. After Tehrik-e-Jihad Pakistan, a new group, Ansar al-Jihad announced its emergence by claiming a major attack on Tank police headquarters in December 2023.

As in the previous several years, the TTP remained the major actor of violence in 2023 when it perpetrated almost half of the total terrorist attacks recorded in the country. While the terrorist group conducted attacks in all four provinces of Pakistan, most of them were concentrated in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The banned TTP carried out 151 terrorist attacks across Pakistan in 2023, over 68 percent more than the attacks it conducted in the year before. The attacks by the TTP claimed 281 lives, compared to 135 in the TTP-orchestrated attacks in the previous year, and left 555 others injured.

The TTP was also involved in 11 suicide attacks in 2023, including four attacks each in Khyber and North Waziristan, and one attack each in Bannu, Peshawar (in KP) and Quetta (in Balochistan). All suicide blasts by the TTP targeted security forces and law enforcement agencies. The worst of suicide blasts by the TTP was the one that hit policemen in Police Lines Mosque, Peshawar on January 30 martyring over 84 people including 81 policemen.

Out of the total 151 attacks perpetrated by the TTP in Pakistan during the year under review, as many as 132 concentrated in KP province alone, while 15 happened in Balochistan, another three in Punjab, and one in Karachi. Apart from these terrorist attacks, many of the cross-border attacks from Afghanistan in 2023 (mainly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) were also perpetrated by the TTP.

Meanwhile, growing focus and presence of the TTP in Balochistan is also worrying. By announcing new shadow provinces, the TTP has divided its organization in Balochistan into two parts. The Baloch-populated areas have been made part of the 'Kalat-Markan chapter', while Pashtun areas are part of Zhob 'chapter'. Zhob chapter was formed earlier, about a year before the announcement of establishment of 'Kalat-Makran chapter'. Moreover, in Zhob there is now proper deployment of the TTP. Indeed, the TTP has been trying to develop its structure along the lines of the Afghan

⁶⁵ Muhammad Amir Rana, "Persisting TTP threat," *Dawn*, June 18, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1760382>

Taliban. Its presence in Balochistan is also not a new phenomenon. While the Afghan Taliban leadership's existence in Balochistan goes back to 1996-97, the TTP came into existence in 2007, and initially it was not interested in Balochistan. However, with the passage of time, after strengthening its position in former FATA, the TTP developed its Balochistan chapter that was known as Tehreek-e-Taliban Balochistan. Similarly, the TTP developed nexus with the so-called Punjabi Taliban, and two of its current factions, Jamaatul Ahrar and Hizbul Ahrar, had strong support base and presence in Punjab and Islamabad.

However, about 90-95 percent members and commanders of the TTP belong to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. Like the TTP, non-TTP Pakistani Taliban groups are also mostly derived from KP including its tribal districts or ex-FATA.⁶⁶

The Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) has also been emerging as a critical threat to Pakistan's security for the past few years. After the TTP, the second highest number of terrorism-related casualties in Pakistan in 2023 was caused by the attacks perpetrated by the IS-K. The group has become quite active in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan. Daesh's presence in Balochistan predates 2023, and militants from the region have been actively supporting and joining the group since its emergence in 2014. To streamline its focus on Afghanistan and attract Pakistani militant outfits, particularly those associated with TTP, LeJ, and other groups concentrating on India-administered Kashmir, IS leadership introduced the Islamic State Province of Pakistan (ISPP) in May 2019, separating it administratively from IS-Khorasan. However, in 2021, IS Central directed the integration of almost the entire KP province, previously under ISPP's jurisdiction, into IS-K's organizational network.⁶⁷

Compared to eight in 2021 and 23 in 2022, IS-K perpetrated a total of 17 terrorist attacks during the year 2023. These attacks claimed 155 lives and injured 222 others, which suggests that the group orchestrated some high-impact attacks. Out of the total 17 attacks claimed by the IS-K, as many as 10 took place in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (six attacks in Bajaur and four in Peshawar), and seven happened in Balochistan (five in Mastung, and one attack each in Bolan and Kalat districts).

The group perpetrated three major suicide bombings in 2023 including one each in Bolan (martyring 9 Balochistan Constabulary officials and one civilian), Bajaur (martyring 64 civilians in a JUI-F political gathering), and Mastung (martyring over 63 people in a 12th Rabiul Awwal (the birthday of the holy prophet (PBUH) procession).

In KP, one of the IS-K's main targets has been Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam leaders, mainly in Bajaur. After carrying out a deadly suicide bombing in a JUI-F gathering in Bajaur in July, the IS-K published a propaganda booklet on why the group will continue to attack religious political parties in Pakistan. The author of the pamphlet justified the attack on political-ideological grounds (i.e., for JUI-F's taking part in democratic process) and also termed it a revenge for the violent death of an IS-K attacker arrested by JUI-F Bajaur members in 2021. The group also targeted Ahle Hadith and Deobandi scholars and leaders, on the suspicion of their support for the Afghan Taliban or the TTP. Other targets hit by the IS-K in KP included members of Sikh and Christian communities and alleged 'spies' of either the Taliban or security agencies.

⁶⁶ PIPS' interview with senior journalist Aqeel Yousafzai in Peshawar on September 4, 2023.

⁶⁷ Zia Ur Rehman, "Inside Balochistan's sectarian shift - the rise of IS from Lashkar-i-Jhangvi," *Dawn*, October 3, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1778910/inside-balochistans-sectarian-shift-the-rise-of-is-from-lashkar-i-jhangvi>

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In Balochistan, the IS-K attacks targeted security and law enforcement personnel, a polio vaccination team, an alleged spy or 'collaborator of the government', a JUI-F leader, and a 12th Rabiul Awwal (the birthday of the holy prophet (PBUH) procession.

The banned Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) has been the main actor of instability and terrorist violence in Balochistan, but in recent years it simply surpassed other Baloch groups in terms of frequency and intensity of terrorist attacks. In the year 2023, too, it was the major actor of terrorist violence in Balochistan, followed by the Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF) for the second place in terms of frequency and intensity of attacks. Indeed, the BLA and BLF are the major actors of instability and insecurity in the province, and their growing attacks and propaganda are a challenge for the government and security agencies with regard to ensuring implementation of CPEC and other development projects and attracting foreign investment in the province.

Compared to 46 in the previous year, the BLA carried out 49 terrorist attacks in 2023 – including 48 in Balochistan, and one in Karachi. These attacks killed 48 people – including 20 security and law enforcement personnel and 24 civilians; 4 militants also died in these attacks – and injured 86 people.

Attacks by BLA spread over 18 districts of Balochistan, with more frequent attacks reported from Quetta (11 attacks), Kalat, Khuzdar and Panjgur (5 attacks each), Harnai and Kech (4 attacks each), and Bolan (3 attacks). About 60 percent of attacks perpetrated by BLA targeted security forces and law enforcement agencies; other main targets hit by the BLA included government officials/state symbols, non-Baloch workers and settlers, alleged spies, and state infrastructure. BLA also targeted a military convoy escorting Chinese workers near Gwadar.

Sectarian violence has apparently also picked up in Pakistan as in the year 2023 a total of 43 people lost their lives and another 61 were injured in 16 incidents of such violence. Incidents of sectarian violence were reported mainly from Karachi in Sindh (7 incidents), Kurram in KP (5), Mastung and Quetta in Balochistan (3), and Diamir in Gilgit-Baltistan (one incident). Besides Karachi in Sindh, Kurram district of KP remained sectarian flashpoint during the last few months of 2023 where besides a sectarian-related attack at least four incidents of armed sectarian and inter-tribal clashes also took place.

Violent Sunni sectarian group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi perpetrated six attacks in 2023 including four in Balochistan (Mastung and Quetta districts), and one attack each in Karachi and Gilgit-Baltistan. A total of 16 people lost their lives and another 27 were injured in these attacks. All these attacks targeted members of Shia and Hazara communities, including A local leader of Pakistan Peoples Party, Amjad Husain, in Karachi, who was killed due to his sectarian, Shia, identity. Worst of these attacks was the one reported in December 2023 from Chillas where militants opened fire on a passenger bus on Karakorum Highway killing 10 people including two army soldiers and injuring 26 others.

Meanwhile unspecified rival sectarian groups (mainly Shia) perpetrated seven attacks in the year including six in Karachi and one in KP, which in all claimed nine lives and injured eight others.

The incidence of *faith-based violence* is evidently escalating in Pakistan, signalling a concerning rise in extremism and a diminishing space for minority communities. In 2023, Pakistan witnessed an increase in communal or faith-based violence, with 10 recorded incidents, including four cases of mob violence. These incidents resulted in the deaths of three individuals accused of blasphemy in Sheikhpura (Punjab), Mardan (KP), and Kech (Balochistan), while 16 others, including 15 Hindu students in Lahore and one member of the Christian community in Faisalabad, were injured. Notable instances of communal violence included attacks on and sabotage of at least four

worship places belonging to the Ahmadi community in Karachi, as well as the torching and ransacking of 19 churches and 86 residences of Christian community members in Faisalabad. Overall, these acts of communal and mob violence targeted worship places and members of the Ahmadi community in four attacks, individuals accused of blasphemy in three attacks, the Christian community and churches in two incidents, and members of the Hindu community in one such incident.

Meanwhile, *insecurity and violence at the Pak-Afghan border* have been growing since the Taliban took power in Afghanistan. The situation remains tense as illegal Afghan refugees are repatriated mainly through the Torkham and Chaman borders in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, respectively. The movement of militants across the border to conduct attacks within Pakistan exacerbates border insecurity and strains bilateral relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan. While tensions are typically high at the Chaman border in Balochistan, significant cross-border attacks originating from Afghanistan have also occurred in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. For instance, on September 6, 2023, the TTP launched a border incursion from Kunar, Afghanistan, into Pakistan's Chitral district, resulting in clashes between border forces at the Torkham crossing. Notably, while cross-border attacks were previously attributed to groups like the TTP during Ghani's regime, many such incidents now involve Afghan border forces under the Taliban. The Taliban's response to Pakistan's border fencing efforts has been marked by a stricter and more nationalistic stance. This tension culminated in Afghan authorities closing the main border crossing with Pakistan on December 6, 2023, following a dispute over the placement of a signboard by Pakistani authorities at the Torkham border crossing, which Afghan officials claimed was on their side of the border.⁶⁸

3.3 Geographical spread of terrorist violence in 2023

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has been witnessing heightened level of terrorist violence by the TTP as well as IS-K since the August 2021, although militants had been trying to regroup there long before that. In July 2021, when the Afghan Taliban emerged as a more critical component in the Afghan power calculus by reportedly extending their control “roughly [over] a third of all 421 districts and district centers in Afghanistan,”⁶⁹ the TTP also started intensifying attacks against Pakistani security and law enforcement personnel. Since then, the TTP and affiliates have been constantly increasing their presence and activities in the erstwhile FATA and other parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The twin Waziristan and adjacent KP districts in southern KP such as Lakki Marwat, Tank, Bannu and DI Khan, as well as the provincial capital and neighboring Khyber districts have, in particular, emerged as flashpoints of insecurity and violence since August 2021.

Most of TTP and other militants had relocated to Afghanistan after the 2014 military operations in North Waziristan and Khyber. However, in 2017, the TTP instigated regrouping, along with an ideological transformation leading towards the use of Pashtun nationalism for political purposes. Since then, the group has been strengthening its position in bordering areas and adding to its operational strength including with the help of Al-Qaeda. Separately, the TTP has continued to add more groups in its fold, a process it started in 2020.

In 2023, the province experienced the highest number of attacks for any one region of the country. PIPS recorded a total of 174 terrorist attacks in the province (or about 57 percent of the total attacks

⁶⁸ “Afghan authorities close main border crossing with Pakistan over ‘welcome’ sign dispute,” Arab News Pakistan, December 6, 2023, <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/2421206/pakistan>

⁶⁹ Aljazeera, July 5, 2021, <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/4/taliban-seizes-key-districts-in-afghanistan-as-govt-forces-flee>>

in Pakistan in 2023), which claimed 422 lives and injured 782 others. Militants resorted to intensified or high-impact attacks in the province during the year under review.

Secondly, as noted earlier, most of the terrorist activity in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was concentrated in two regions: one, southern KP districts; and second, the provincial capital and its neighboring Khyber district. Indeed, over 82 percent of the total 174 attacks recorded in KP in 2023 concentrated in the six southern districts of the province (including North and South Waziristan, Bannu, Tank, Lakki Marwat and DI Khan) as well as the provincial capital Peshawar and neighboring Khyber district.

Apart from these two regions, where mostly the TTP and other local Taliban groups remained active in the year 2023, a third KP region, i.e., Bajaur, also remained a flashpoint of terrorist violence that was mainly perpetrated by the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) terrorist group. As many 10 attacks happened in Bajaur and most of these were claimed by the IS-K. On the whole, terrorist attacks were recorded from 22 districts of the KP province in 2023. Moreover, about 75 percent of the total reported attacks from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa targeted personnel of security and law enforcement agencies, mainly army and police.

Similarly, situation in Afghanistan has been impacting *Balochistan* in many ways. First, the number of terrorist attacks has increased in Balochistan like in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. There is evidence to suggest that not only have the militants been crossing over to Balochistan since August 2021, but they were also found in possession of more sophisticated weapons as was observed in Nushki and Panjgur attacks on FC camps by the BLA militants early 2022. Experts also underscore that the Baloch insurgents will certainly draw inspiration from the changing environment in the region and will further increase and intensify their attacks. Meanwhile the banned TTP has also become more active in Pashtun belt of Balochistan and IS-K has also been operating in certain districts of the province including Quetta and Mastung.

Balochistan was the second most terrorism-affected province in 2023, after Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Baloch insurgent groups as well as religiously inspired militant groups perpetrated a total of 110 attacks in the province, compared to 79 in previous year. These attacks claimed 229 lives, compared to 106 in the year before, and wounded 282 others. Different Baloch insurgent groups, mainly the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) and Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF), perpetrated 78 attacks in Balochistan killing 86 people and wounding 137 others.

The attacks by Baloch insurgent groups spread over 19 districts, mainly in central, southern and southwestern parts of the province, and largely targeted security forces. Meanwhile, religiously inspired militant groups such as the TTP, Tehrik-e-Jihad Pakistan, and the Islamic State terrorist group (IS-K), etc., perpetrated 29 attacks in Balochistan, up from seven in previous year, which caused death to 139 people and injuries to another 144 people. While the TTP and affiliates perpetrated most of the attacks in northern, or largely Pashtun-populated districts of the province including those bordering on Afghanistan and KP, the IS-K was found more active in Mastung, Bolan and Kalat districts. Meanwhile, three sectarian-related attacks killed four and wounded one person in Balochistan in 2023.

In Sindh, a total of 15 terrorist attacks took place including 14 attacks in Karachi alone, and one attack in Jamshoro in interior Sindh. These attacks killed a total of 16 people and injured 26 others. Seven of the reported attacks from Sindh in 2023 were perpetrated by sub-nationalist insurgent groups including four attacks by Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army (SRA) in Karachi and Jamshoro, and three by Baloch insurgent groups BLA and BLF in Karachi. Meanwhile, indicating a relative rise in sectarian violence, as many as seven sectarian-related terrorist attacks also took place in

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Karachi that claimed six lives and injured two others. The banned TTP also perpetrated a gun-and-bomb coordinated attack on the Karachi Police Office martyring four people (3 attackers were also killed) and injuring 17 others.

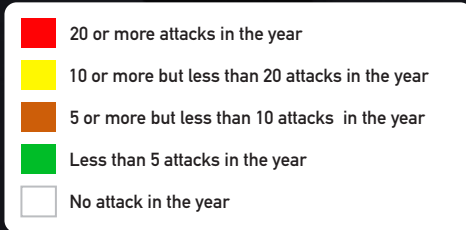
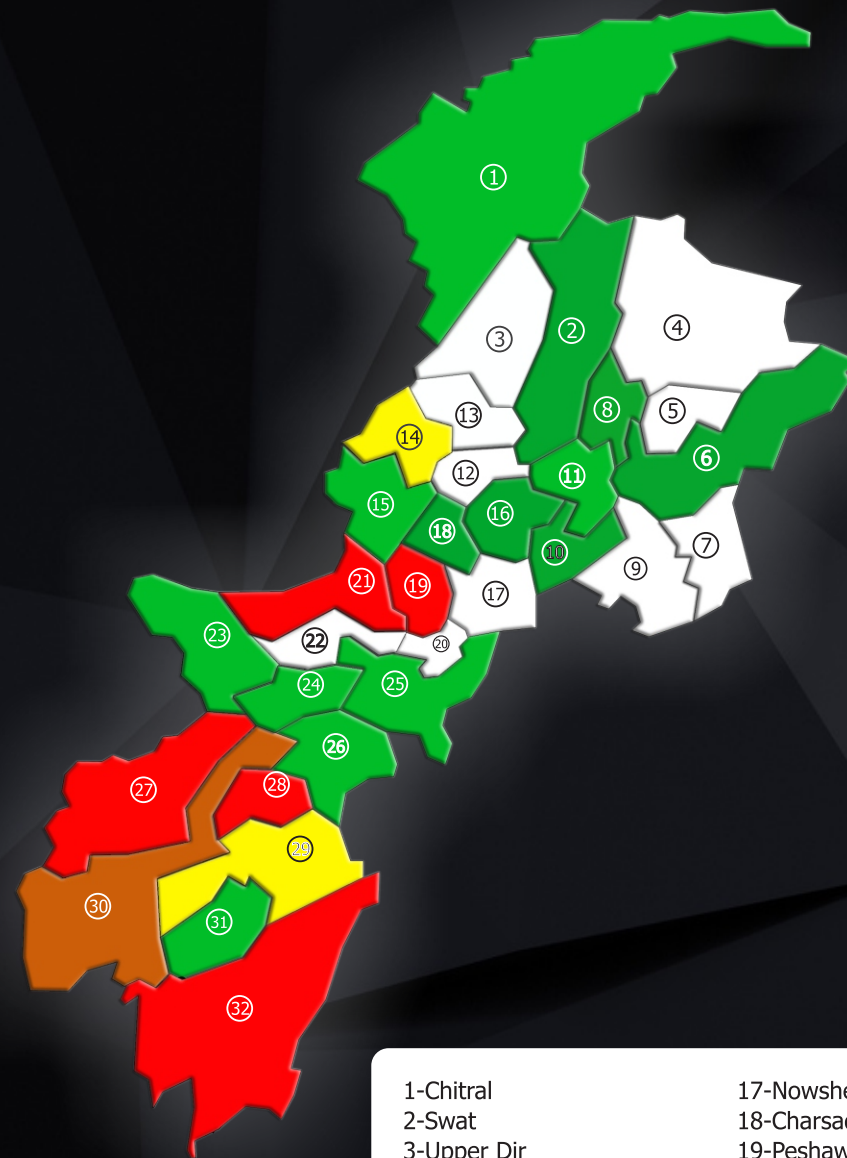
Six terrorist attacks took place in *Punjab* in 2023, compared to three in the year before, which claimed 16 lives and injured eight others. Four of these attacks were perpetrated by the TTP and Tehrik-e-Jihad Pakistan, including three in Mianwali and one in Khanewal, which targeted law enforcement and intelligence officials. For one, security forces repulsed a major gun and bomb assault on the Mianwali Training Air Base of the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) in November by killing all nine attackers of TJP. Meanwhile, a Baloch insurgent group Baloch Nationalist Army (BNA) claimed one IED blast that targeted Jaffar Express near Chichawatni in Sahiwal district, killing a woman and injuring seven others. Separately, a member of Sikh community, Paramjit Singh Panjwar, was shot dead by unknown attackers in Lahore.

One, apparently, sectarian-related terrorist attack was recorded in Diamir (Gilgit-Baltistan), which claimed 10 lives and wounded 26 others.

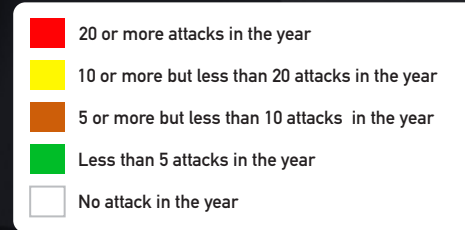
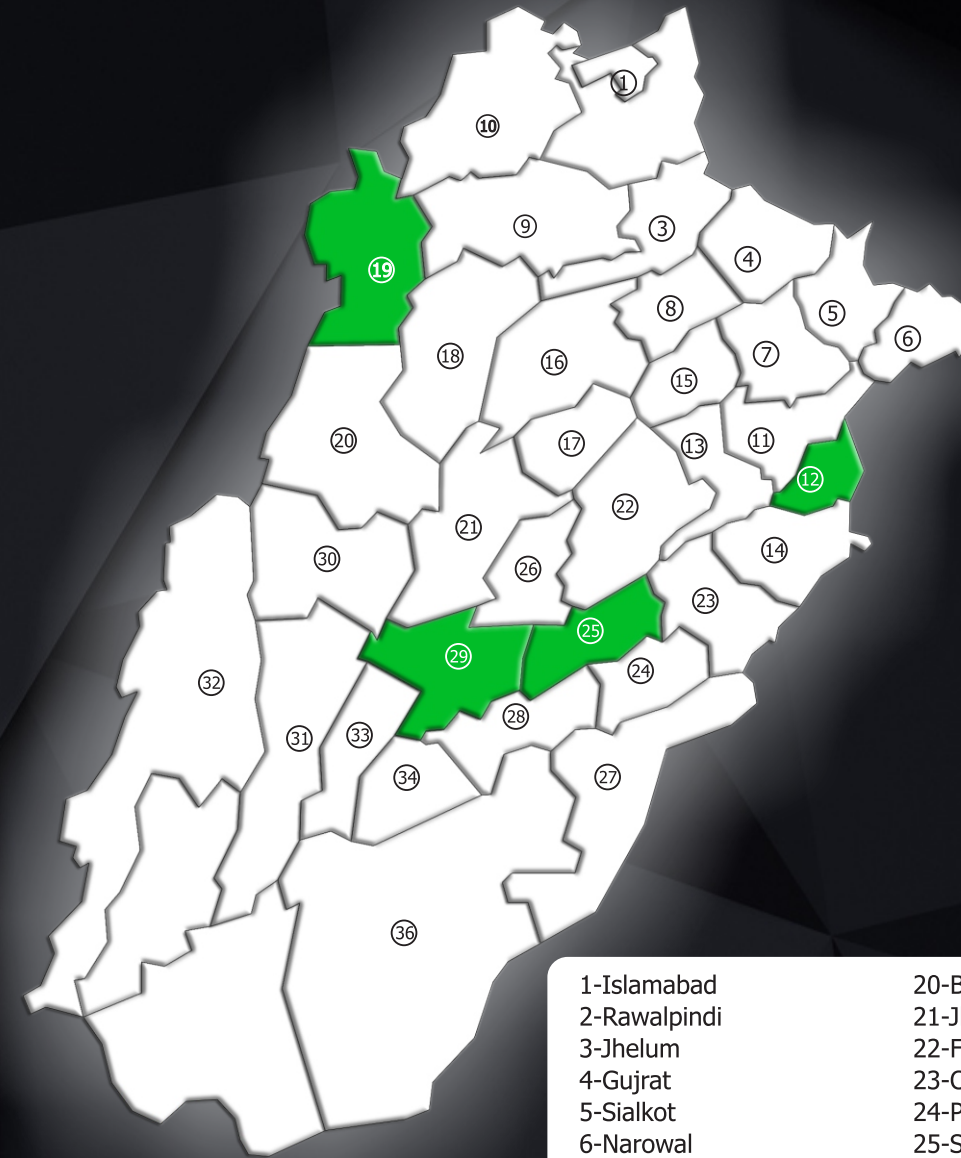
The following pages entail the maps showing the geographical spread of terrorist violence across Pakistan as a whole and province-wise.

KP (including erstwhile FATA)

Punjab

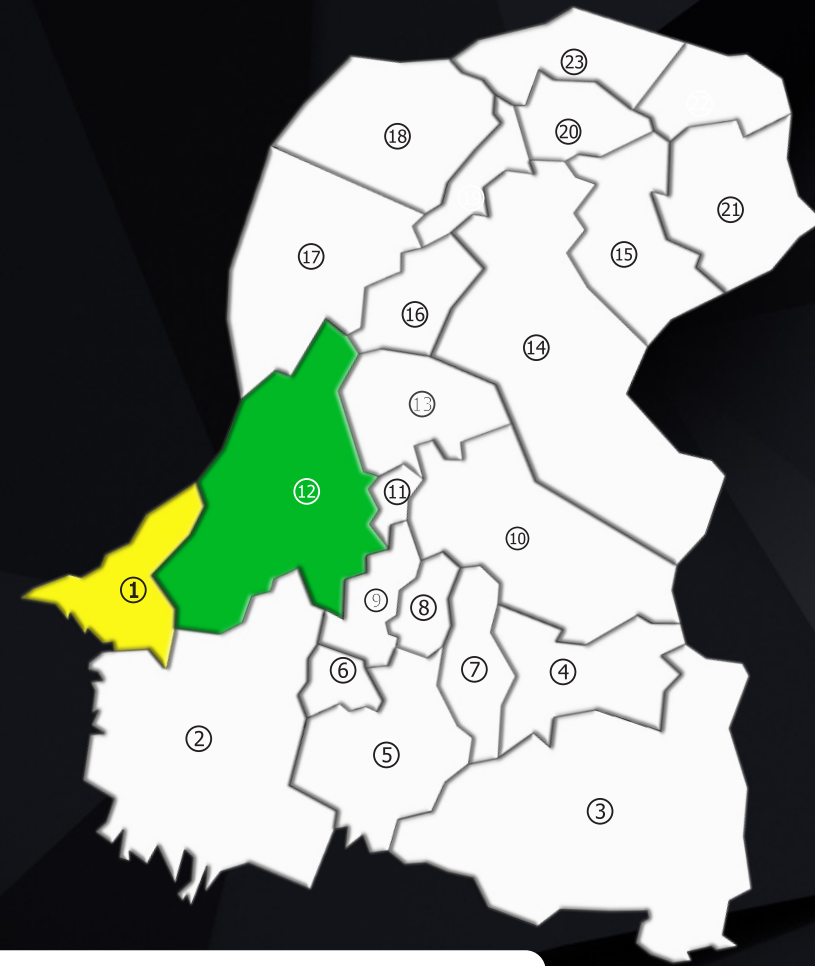


- | | |
|-------------------|---------------------|
| 1-Chitral | 17-Nowshera |
| 2-Swat | 18-Charsada |
| 3-Upper Dir | 19-Peshawar |
| 4-Kohistan | 20-Adam Khel |
| 5-Battagram | 21-Khyber |
| 6-Mansehra | 22-Orakzai |
| 7-Abbottabad | 23-Kurram |
| 8-Shangla | 24-Hangu |
| 9-Haripur | 25-Kohat |
| 10-Swabi | 26-Karak |
| 11-Buner | 27-North Waziristan |
| 12-Malakand | 28-Bannu |
| 13-Lower Dir | 29-Lakki Marwat |
| 14-Bajaur | 30-South Waziristan |
| 15-Mohmand Agency | 31-Tank |
| 16-Mardan | 32-Dera Ismail Khan |

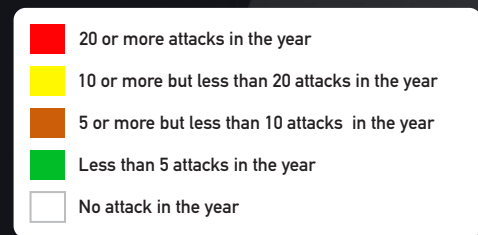


- | | |
|-------------------|--------------------|
| 1-Islamabad | 20-Bhakkar |
| 2-Rawalpindi | 21-Jhang |
| 3-Jhelum | 22-Faisalabad |
| 4-Gujrat | 23-Okara |
| 5-Sialkot | 24-Pakpattan |
| 6-Narowal | 25-Sahiwal |
| 7-Gujranwala | 26-Toba Tek Singh |
| 8-Mandi Bahauddin | 27-Bahawalnagar |
| 9-Chakwal | 28-Vehari |
| 10-Attock | 29-Khanewal |
| 11-Sheikhupura | 30-Layyah |
| 12-Lahore | 31-Muzaffargarh |
| 13-Nankana Sahib | 32-Dera Ghazi Khan |
| 14-Kasur | 33-Multan |
| 15-Hafizabad | 34-Lodhran |
| 16-Sargodha | 35-Rajanpur |
| 17-Chiniot | 36-Bahawalpur |
| 18-Khushab | 37-Rahim Yar Khan |
| 19-Mianwali | |

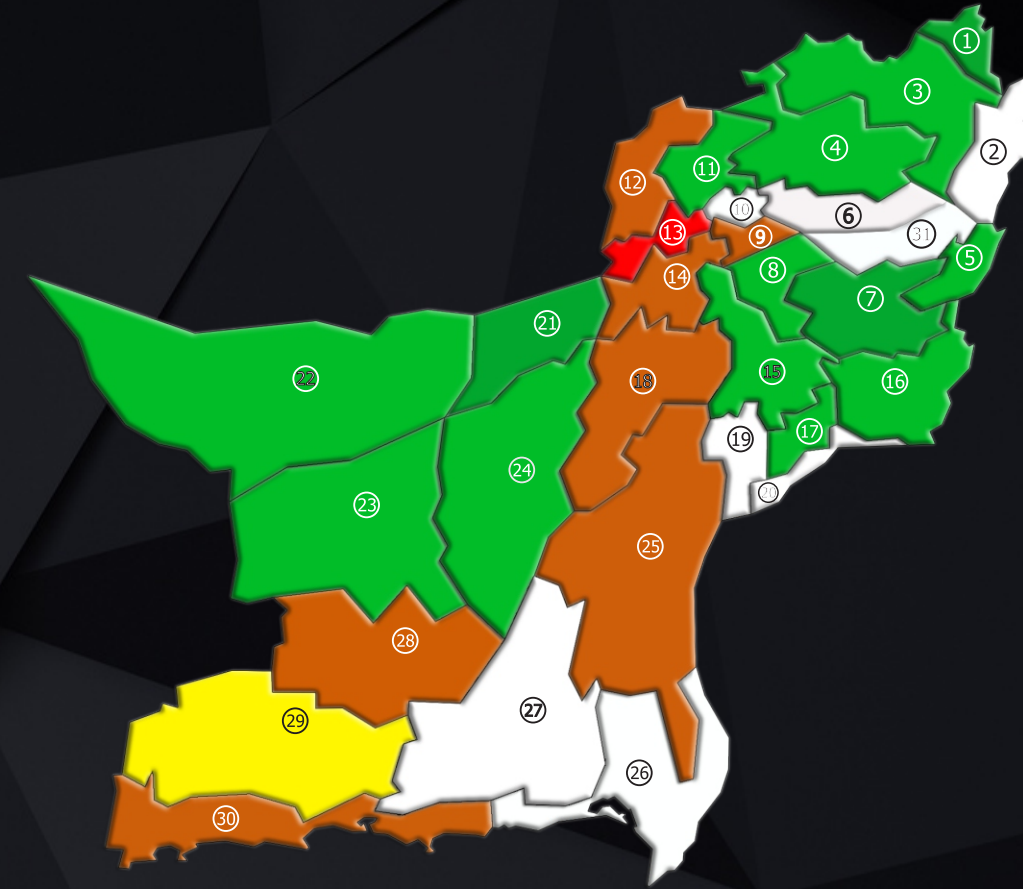
Sindh



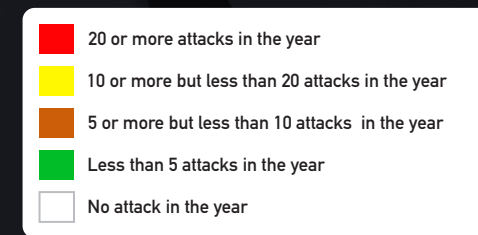
- | | |
|------------------------|----------------------|
| 1-Karachi | 18-Qambar Shahdadkot |
| 2-Thatta | 19-Larkana |
| 3-Tharparker | 20-Shikarpur |
| 4-Umerkot | 21-Ghotki |
| 5-Badin | 22-Kashmore |
| 6-Tando Muhammad Khan | 23-Jacobabad |
| 7-Mirpurkhas | |
| 8-Tando Allahyar | |
| 9-Hyderabad | |
| 10-Sanghar | |
| 11-Matiari | |
| 12-Jamshoro | |
| 13-Shaheed Benazirabad | |
| 14-Khairpur | |
| 15-Sukkur | |
| 16-Naushahro Firoze | |
| 17-Dadu | |



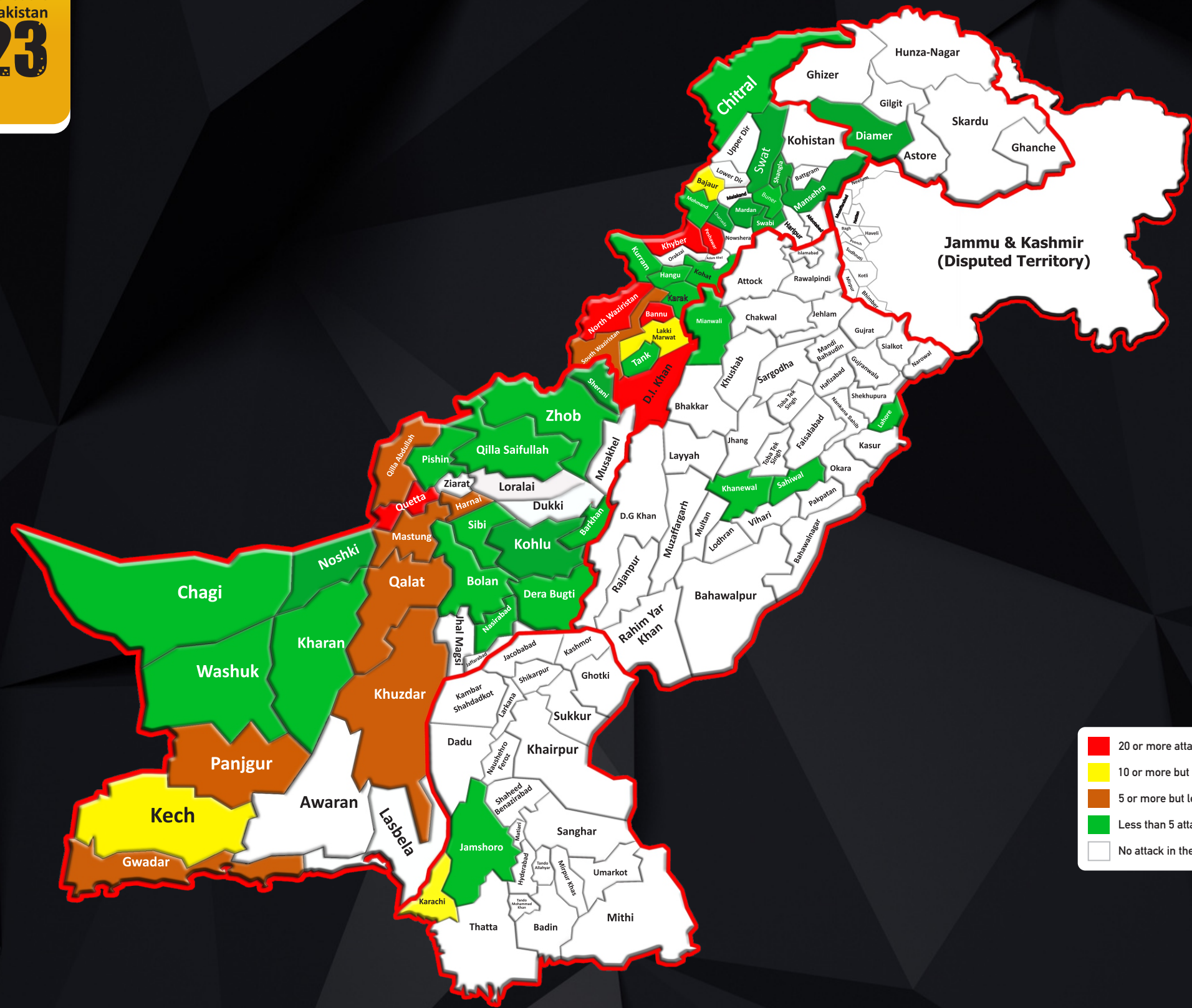
Balochistan



- | | |
|-------------------|---------------|
| 1-Sherani | 18-Kalat |
| 2-Musakhel | 19-Jhal Magsi |
| 3-Zhob | 20-Jaffarabad |
| 4-Qilla Saifullah | 21-Nushki |
| 5-Barkhan | 22-Chaghi |
| 6-Loralai | 23-Washuk |
| 7-Kohlu | 24-Kharan |
| 8-Sibi | 25-Khuzdar |
| 9-Harnai | 26-Lasbela |
| 10-Ziarat | 27-Awaran |
| 11-Pishin | 28-Panjgur |
| 12-Qilla Abdullah | 29-Kech |
| 13-Quetta | 30-Gwadar |
| 14-Mastung | 31-Dukki |
| 15-Bolan | |
| 16-Dera Bugti | |
| 17-Nasirabad | |



Geographical Spread of Insecurity in Pakistan
2023



- 20 or more attacks in the year
- 10 or more but less than 20 attacks in the year
- 5 or more but less than 10 attacks in the year
- Less than 5 attacks in the year
- No attack in the year

3.4 Links and nexuses within militant groups

The Islamic State-Khorasan distinguishes itself by abstaining from forming alliances with other religiously inspired or nationalist groups.

Sindh nationalism, akin to that of Balochistan, has traditionally maintained a left-oriented stance, distancing itself from religious affiliations. This ideological positioning presents a challenge for groups like the Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army (SRA) or Sindhudesh Liberation Army (SLA) to forge alliances with religious factions, as it risks alienating their already dwindling support base.

The Baloch insurgents are increasingly perceived as more trained and equipped. Some analysts attribute this development to the evolving situation in Afghanistan, speculating that Baloch militants might have capitalized on opportunities for training and support from various groups, including the TTP. Others suggest that the Baloch insurgents' connections in Iran and India might also play a role. Recent escalations in their tactics and weaponry are largely viewed in the context of developments in Afghanistan.

Baloch insurgent groups were found in possession of more sophisticated weapons as was observed in Nushki and Panjgur attacks on FC camps by the BLA militants early 2022. Therefore, there is a possibility that they got these weapons from TTP or ISIS-K groups in Afghanistan. But there is no evidence to suggest that that may have happened on the basis of some organizational cooperation or nexus as the Baloch insurgent groups have no ideological linkages or affinity with these religiously inspired groups. But they try to copycat operational tactics of the TTP or other similar groups. For one, Baloch groups have been carrying out suicide blasts since 2018 but in doing so their motivation has been entirely different from that of religiously inspired groups. Baloch groups are not religiously motivated and don't prepare suicide bombers on the promise of going to 'paradise'.

Some observers, interviewed for this study, noted an increasing operational collaboration between Sindhi and Baloch groups, particularly in Karachi. Indeed, in recent years cooperation between Baloch and Sindhi groups has strengthened. For one, the Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army (SRA) has developed a nexus with Baloch Raji Ajoi Sangar (BRAS), an alliance of four Baloch separatist groups, in late 2018. Baloch separatist groups have reportedly provided training to Sindhi separatist groups in order to enhance the latter's operational capacities. In return, Sindhi separatist groups provide logistical support to Baloch separatists for their operations in Karachi. The Sindhi separatist support has allowed the BLA Bashir Zeb faction to expand their operational area to Karachi, where they carried out several attacks on Chinese targets, including attacks on the Chinese consulate in Karachi in November 2018 and Pakistan Stock Exchange compound in June 2020, among others.

Since its resurgence, the TTP has been actively seeking an alliance with Baloch insurgents. Rumors surfaced in early 2023 about potential collaborations between Baloch insurgents and the TTP. While there appears to be some level of understanding, major separatist groups have abstained from formal alliances, while smaller, independent militants have joined forces with the TTP, possibly to enhance their influence. Despite stark ideological disparities—where the Baloch generally espouse a secular ethos while the TTP adheres to a more extremist religious ideology—their convergence against the common adversary, the Pakistani state, suggests a pragmatic alignment driven by shared strategic interests.

However, there is not credible evidence available to suggest a next between TTP and Baloch insurgent groups. However, the TTP has continued its efforts to reach out to segments of Pakistani

society including Baloch youths. For one, the TTP Umar Media has recently released an 8-minute-long video in Balochi & Urdu on Balochistan titled "A glimpse of continuing state oppression against the Baloch people." It features a speech by commander from Nushki, Balochistan, Aslam Baloch, who joined TTP in 2022. He accuses Pakistani state for several ongoing social & economic issues in the province.⁷⁰

A report submitted to the UN Security Council on July 25, 2023, warned that the outlawed Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is seeking a merger with the global Sunni pan-Islamist terrorist group Al-Qaeda to formulate an umbrella organization to provide safe refuge to all the terror groups operating in South Asia. The report said that "the TTP shares 'close and symbiotic' ties with the Afghan Taliban and is seeking a merger with the regional affiliates to expand its terror operations. The report on global operations of Al-Qaeda and Islamic State [ISIS] by the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team of the UN Security Council said: 'While Al-Qaeda has an estimated 400 fighters in Afghanistan, its affiliate, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), has an estimated 200 fighters led by the emir of AQIS, Osama Mehmood".⁷¹

Although the credibility of this and other such reports is contested, the TTP would benefit significantly in logistical and operational capacity, and outreach from such a merger. The merger could also help the TTP transform from a local militant outfit to a global jihadist organization.

The likelihood of an official merger between the TTP and Al-Qaeda remains quite unclear. Al-Qaeda, as a global or transnational terrorist organization, prefers to operate through local or regional alliances, a strategy it has successfully employed in Pakistan through partnerships with groups like TTP and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. Al-Qaeda has been aiding the TTP in regrouping and strengthening since 2017. However, experts assert that a formal merger may not be in the best interests of either Al-Qaeda or the TTP. Such a move could intensify pressure on the TTP, both internally from the Taliban – who are already facing international criticism for harboring Al-Qaeda leaders in Afghanistan – and externally for aligning with a transnational terrorist group. Currently, the TTP maintains that its focus is solely on Pakistan and does not advocate for "global jihad." Nonetheless, law enforcement agencies in Pakistan have observed operational cooperation between the two groups.⁷²

⁷⁰ <https://twitter.com/Khurasandiary/status/1618642933879799808>

⁷¹ Sajjad Shaukat, "TTP seeking merger with Al-Qaeda and other terror outfits," *The Nation*, August 7, 2023, <https://www.nation.com.pk/07-Aug-2023/ttp-seeking-merger-with-al-qaeda-and-other-terror-outfits>

⁷² PIPS Interview with Ayetzaz Ahmed Goraya, Additional Inspector General CTD Balochistan, in Quetta in September 2023.

4. Profiling actors of terrorist violence in Pakistan

4.1 Key terrorist groups in Pakistan: agendas, targets, areas

While Pakistan has seen a variety of militant groups, including those with religious, sub-nationalist, and sectarian orientations, the TTP and its affiliates, IS-K, and certain Balochi and Sindhi nationalist groups have emerged as prominent actors in recent times, which are implicated in the majority of terrorist attacks reported from across the country.

Following the Zarb-Azb Operation in 2014, many militant groups based in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) relocated to Afghanistan. Similarly, leaders of Baloch groups have long been in self-exile, with some residing in Afghanistan and Iran. The post-Taliban landscape in Afghanistan has either encouraged or compelled Pakistani militants to conduct cross-border incursions and bolster their terrorist activities within Pakistan.

However, not all militant infrastructure in Pakistan has shifted to Afghanistan. For example, fighters and ground commanders of Baloch insurgent groups have largely remained entrenched in their respective areas, though they have hiding places in mountainous regions of Balochistan during military operations.

Likewise, members of local Taliban groups have maintained a presence in former FATA and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, either by going underground or adopting a low profile. Nevertheless, the current situation is concerning as various militant factions are becoming operationally active within the country.

Regrettably, over 20 militant groups were identified as active across Pakistan in 2022 and 2023. However, as demonstrated in previous sections of this report, a few key actors have been responsible for the majority of terrorist violence, notably the TTP and its affiliates, IS-K, and the BLA. (See the table below)

Table 5: Key actors of terrorist violence in Pakistan in 2023⁷³

Organization	Balochistan	KP	Punjab & Islamabad	Sindh (excluding Karachi)	Karachi	GB	Total Attacks
Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)	15	132	3	-	1	-	151
Local Taliban	-	14	-	-	-	-	14
Tehrik-e-Jihad Pakistan	3	4	1	-	-	-	8
Hafiz Gul Bahadur Group	-	3	-	-	-	-	3
Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K)	7	10	-	-	-	-	17
Ittehadul Mujahideen-i-Khurasan	-	1	-	-	-	-	1
Ansar al-Jihad	-	1	-	-	-	-	1

⁷³ Data and statistics are derived from PIPS' digital database on security incidents: <www.pakpips.com/app/database>

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Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA)	48	-	-	-	1	-	49
Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF)	14	-	-	-	2	-	16
Balochistan Republican Army (BRA)	4	-	-	-	-	-	4
United Baloch Army (UBA)	1	-	-	-	-	-	1
Baloch Republican Guards	2	-	-	-	-	-	2
Baloch Nationalist Army (BNA)	-	-	1	-	-	-	1
Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army (SRA)	-	-	-	1	3	-	4
Unspecified Baloch insurgents	8	-	-	-	-	-	8
Rival Sectarian group	-	1	-	-	6	-	7
Lashkar-e-Jhangvi	4	-	-	-	1	1	6
Unknown militants	4	8	1	-	-	-	13
Total	110	174	6	1	14	1	306

4.1.1 Religiously inspired militant groups

- **Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)**

Experts on Taliban militancy suggest that while the Kabul faction of the Afghan Taliban or the Haqqani network may be supporting the TTP, senior Taliban leaders in Kandahar are inclined towards improving relations with Pakistan. In general, the Afghan Taliban are unlikely to relinquish their strategic leverage over Pakistan, which the TTP represents. However, some argue that engaging with TTP factions open to dialogue could potentially create divisions within the group.⁷⁴

The group emerged in 2007 as an amalgamation of various Sunni Islamist groups operating independently in Pakistan, mainly in ex-FATA. Despite its allegiance to the Afghan Taliban emir, it has maintained its organizational and operational autonomy. Initially headquartered in Pakistan's tribal areas, it faced significant military pressure from Pakistani forces, leading to the dismantling of much of its network by 2014. However, the TTP regrouped itself in Afghanistan, and gained momentum after the Afghan Taliban's victory in 2021. Efforts for peace talks between Pakistan and the TTP faltered, leading to renewed hostilities. Pakistan alleges TTP sanctuaries in Afghanistan, a claim refuted by the Afghan Taliban. The recent resurgence in TTP attacks, following the failed talks, has strained relations between Islamabad and the Taliban administration in Afghanistan.

⁷⁴ PIPS' interview with senior journalist Aqeel Yousafzai in Peshawar on September 4, 2023.

Agenda

The TTP aims to remove the Pakistani government from the Pashtun tribal lands in the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, impose its own interpretation of Islamic law, and ultimately establish Pakistan as an Islamic state.⁷⁵

Areas of influence and operation

The group is primarily based in eastern Afghanistan with its members present in small numbers in parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces in Pakistan. The group's support structures also exist in Karachi and Punjab. However, experts on militancy hold that about 90-95 percent members and commanders of the TTP belong to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Similarly, non-TTP Pakistani Taliban groups are also mostly derived from KP including its tribal districts or ex-FATA.⁷⁶

Following the Taliban's capture of Kabul, the TTP escalated its activities in southern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) districts, adjacent to Afghanistan's Paktika, Khost, and Paktia provinces.. Notably, the TTP and its affiliate, Lashkar-e-Islam, orchestrated several attacks in Peshawar and Khyber districts. Additionally, recent months have witnessed a surge in TTP operations across Malakand, Mardan, Swabi, and other central KP regions. Meanwhile, the Hafiz Gul Bahadur group remains primarily active in Bannu and North Waziristan.

However, this time TTP did not get any local or public support in KP when they tried to regroup in Malakand and other areas. People came out and protested against the spotted presence of TTP members who are eventually sitting in their hideouts and come out only to coerce people. The TTP has lost considerable support among religious groups and madrassas. Some people mainly students of few madrassas, who used to travel to Afghanistan to fight against international forces and Afghan troops along with the Taliban may still support the TTP. TTP also recruits from madrassas and former jihadis.⁷⁷

Law enforcement officials dispute the substantial presence or support of the TTP in Balochistan, recognizing some activity of the group in Pashtun areas bordering Zhob. However, independent observers frequently highlight substantial TTP activities in Balochistan's Pashtun-inhabited zones, spanning from Quetta, the provincial capital, to Chaman and Qilla Saifullah towns, bordering Afghanistan, and extending to Zhob district, adjacent to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. Data and statistics further indicate that the proscribed TTP and its affiliated TJP have orchestrated multiple attacks in Balochistan's Pashtun-populated areas following the Taliban's seizure of Kabul in August 2021, primarily targeting Quetta, Zhob, Chaman (Qilla Abdullah), Qilla Saifullah, Sherani, Washuk, and Pishin.

In Sindh, tribal militants like the TTP may have a limited presence in the Pashtun belt encompassing Manghopir and Orangi Town.⁷⁸ A local journalist highlighted that the TTP network in Karachi has considerably weakened since the 2013 Karachi Operation. Prior to this, they engaged in extortion, collaborated with criminal syndicates, engaged in kidnappings for ransom, and exerted influence over certain areas. The operation disrupted connections between political factions and militant/criminal elements. However, recent reports have traced extortion calls to the

⁷⁵ For details, see the TTP profile at US National Counterterrorism Center's International Terrorism Guide Website: <<https://www.dni.gov/nctc/index.html>>

⁷⁶ PIPS' interview with senior journalist Aqeel Yousafzai in Peshawar on September 4, 2023.

⁷⁷ PIPS' interview with Sohail Khalid, DIG CTD KP, in Peshawar on September 4, 2023.

⁷⁸ PIPS' interview with journalist Abdul Jabbar Nasir in Karachi in September 2023.

Manghopir area, where TTP militants were reportedly sighted. Despite this, law enforcement agencies in Karachi maintain strong coordination and intelligence sharing, making it challenging for militants to operate and launch attacks.⁷⁹

Additionally, another observer pointed out that the TTP enjoys ideological support in madrassas in the interior of Sindh. While sectarian violence has significantly decreased, interior Sindh remains vulnerable during religious events like Moharram and at shrines.⁸⁰

Security experts suggest that the TTP lacks a significant operational presence in Punjab but is attempting to reconnect with former allies in the province.⁸¹ Currently, the TTP struggles to secure local facilitation in Punjab, except for a few pockets in south Punjab where the LeJ previously supported its activities. Historical alliances with groups like Jamaatul Ahrar and Lal Masjid clerics had provided the TTP with limited inroads in the past. However, it's possible that the TTP is intentionally avoiding targeting Punjab's major cities to evade comprehensive counterterrorism operations by Pakistan and pressure from the TTA.⁸²

- **Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K)**

Since September 2021, IS-K has intensified its efforts to gain prominence in South and Central Asia through various means, including expanded warfare tactics and targeted assassinations of Taliban leaders. Propaganda dissemination has surged, aiming to recruit from diverse linguistic backgrounds. In 2022, cross-border attacks in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Iran, as well as targeting Chinese and Russian nationals in Afghanistan, showcased IS-K's ambitions. While the Taliban have made efforts to counter IS-K since September 2022, the recent decrease in IS-K attacks in Afghanistan in 2023 may signify a strategic slowdown rather than permanent decline. Despite fluctuations, IS-K remains resilient and adaptable, as indicated by its recent attacks in Pakistan including in Bajaur and parts of Balochistan, suggesting a shift in focus to Pakistan following crackdowns in Afghanistan.⁸³

Agenda

IS-K seeks to establish control over Afghanistan as part of a broader ISIS caliphate known as the "Khorasan Province." This conceptual territory spans regions of Iran, China, Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent, and Southeast Asia.⁸⁴

Areas of influence and operation

The IS-K originated primarily in Pakistan and has aggressively extended its operations into Afghanistan. While now primarily focused on Afghanistan, the group maintains activity in certain areas of Pakistan,⁸⁵ notably maintaining a significant presence in Bajaur, which borders Kunar in Afghanistan, Mohmand, and to some extent, Peshawar.

⁷⁹ PIPS' interview with journalist Syed Arfeen in Karachi in September 2023.

⁸⁰ PIPS' interview with journalist Riaz Sohail in Karachi in September 2023.

⁸¹ PIPS' interview with Majid Nizami, senior journalist, in Lahore on September 5, 2023.

⁸² PIPS' interview with Colonel Afzal, CTD Punjab Intelligence Head, in Lahore in September 2023.

⁸³ Amira Jadoon, et al., "The enduring duel: Islamic State Khorasan's survival under Afghanistan's new rulers", Combating Terrorism Center, August 2023, Volume 16, Issue 8,

<https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-enduring-duel-islamic-state-khorasans-survival-under-afghanistans-new-rulers/>

⁸⁴ Paul Lushenko, "ISKP: Afghanistan's new salafi jihadism," Middle East Institute, October 19, 2018,

<https://www.mei.edu/publications/iskp-afghanistans-new-salafi-jihadism>

⁸⁵ Lucas Webber, "Islamic State Khorasan brings war with Pakistan to Afghan soil", *The Diplomat*, December 8, 2022,

<https://thediplomat.com/2022/12/islamic-state-khorasan-brings-war-with-pakistan-to-afghan-soil/>

Daesh in Balochistan was joined by LeJ defectors and members and it is becoming visible again.⁸⁶ Meanwhile, IS-K has conducted several attacks in Balochistan since January 2022 including in Mastung, Kalat, Bolan, Pishin, Qilla Abdullah, Qilla Saifullah, Quetta and Sibi targeting security forces, political leaders, Afghan Taliban, members of Christian and Hindu communities as well as worship places.

- **Hafiz Gul Bahadur (HGB) group**

Hafiz Gul Bahadur group had originated from Dattakhel area of North Waziristan and has been influenced by and associated with the ideology of Afghan Taliban. Gul Bahadur has maintained close relations with the Haqqani group since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.⁸⁷ After US invasion of Afghanistan following the 9/11 attacks, militants of Haqqani Network of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda sneaked into Waziristan where Gul Bahadur forged further closer ties with them. However, Hafiz Gul Bahadur remained largely focused on fighting inside Afghanistan and was not considered anti-Pakistan, at least at the outset. Though the HGB group maintained contacts with the banned TTP after the latter's establishment but did not join it. When security forces launched Operation Zarb-e-Azb in North Waziristan in 2014 against all groups, HGB group moved to Khost in Afghanistan where its ties with the TTP strengthened. The recent attacks by the group in parts of KP can be understood in the context of its strengthening ties with Haqqanis and TTP.⁸⁸

Hafiz Gul Bahadur was initially regarded as an ally of the Pakistan Army and was often referred to as the 'good Taliban' until the initiation of Operation Zarb-e-Azb in North Waziristan. This military operation compelled thousands to seek refuge in Afghanistan.⁸⁹

Agenda

Like the TTP, the HGB wants an Islamic system in the Pashtun dominated areas in Pakistan.

Area of influence or operation

As previously noted, the group's influence is largely concentrated in North Waziristan, but the group is trying to expand into other KP areas as well. The group has carried out 11 attacks across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Bannu, Lakki Marwat, and North Waziristan districts since July 2022, with 5 of them being suicide bombings, predominantly targeting security forces. These attacks have resulted in the loss of 23 security personnel and several civilians. Among these incidents, notable ones include the August 2023 suicide attack on a military convoy in Bannu, which led to the martyrdom of nine soldiers, and the March 2024 assault on an FC post in North Waziristan, resulting in the deaths of seven FC personnel. The latter incident prompted Pakistan to conduct airstrikes on militant hideouts located in Afghanistan.

- **Tehreek-e-Jihad Pakistan (TJP)**

The group first appeared on the horizon of Pakistan's militant landscape in February 2023 when it claimed an attack on an FC check-post in Chaman in Balochistan. Two security personnel were

⁸⁶ PIPS interview with Shaukat Ali, SSP CTD [Intelligence] Balochistan in Quetta on September 7, 2023.

⁸⁷ "The expendables?", *Dawn*, October 20, 2012, <https://www.dawn.com/news/758167>

⁸⁸ Syed Fakhar Kakakhel, "Pakistan: Why Hafiz Gul Bahadur became active in recent upsurge of terrorist violence," VoA, December 2, 2023, <https://www.urduvoa.com/a/who-is-hafiz-gul-bahadur-and-his-group-02dec2023/7381456.html>

⁸⁹ "Militant commander defects from TTP to join HGB group", *The Friday Times*, July 13, 2023, <https://thefridaytimes.com/13-Jul-2023/militant-commander-defects-from-ttp-to-join-hgb-group>

martyred in the attack. Mullah Muhammad Qasim, calling himself spokesman of the Tehrik-e-Jihad Pakistan claimed the attack. The group identified Abdullah Yesghistani its leader.

The group, which has been claiming attacks in KP and Balochistan's Pashtun belt, is shrouded in mystery. Some speculate that it comprises militant commanders associated with the TTP. The TTP itself is not a unified entity but a coalition of various groups; since July 2020, over 42 new groups and commanders have joined its ranks. Among these are factions like Jamaatul Ahrar and Hizbul Ahrar, which have previously shown alignment with IS-K ideology or leadership.

Experts suggest that the newly emerged TJP shares similarities with these factions and is likely affiliated with or closely connected to the TTP. For example, Mullah Qasim of TJP claimed responsibility for the July 12, 2023, attack on a garrison post in Zhob district, Balochistan, which resulted in the deaths of 9 soldiers. Shortly after Qasim's claim, Asad Afridi, a TTP commander and the organization's 'shadow governor' for DI Khan, asserted that the TTP, particularly its Jamaatul Ahrar faction, orchestrated the attack. Eventually, on the evening of July 12, 2023, a statement from TTP-central officially recognized TJP's claim of the Zhob attack, stating that "a brother organization" had carried out the operation independently.

Agenda

The TJP purportedly emerged with the objective of waging jihad against Pakistan, aiming to establish an Islamic state governed by a theocratic interpretation of sharia law akin to the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan.⁹⁰

However, security officials with profound knowledge of Pakistan's militant landscape suspect that the group serves as a facade for larger outfits within the country, such as the TTP or Hafiz Gul Bahadur group. One expert even suggested that the TJP might not exist beyond a Facebook page. It's been observed that when the TTP refrains from claiming an attack, possibly due to pressure from the Afghan Taliban or other factors, the TJP conveniently steps in to take responsibility.⁹¹

Area of influence or operation

The group is believed to be mainly active in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces. Since its inception, the TJP has claimed eight attacks including four in KP (Bajaur, DI Khan, Lakki Marwat, and Peshawar districts), three in Balochistan (Qilla Abdullah, Qilla Saifullah, and Zhob), and one in Punjab's Mianwali district. These attacks predominantly targeted security and law enforcement agencies.

Out of the eight attacks attributed to the group, four were suicide and fedayeen assaults occurring in Peshawar, Bajaur, DI Khan, and Lakki Marwat districts of KP. Among the prominent attacks orchestrated by the TJP was the assault on a Frontier Corps camp in Muslim Bagh town, Qilla Saifullah district, on May 12, 2023, resulting in the martyrdom of seven individuals, including six FC personnel. Another significant incident was the suicide attack in DI Khan on December 12, 2023, which claimed the lives of 23 army soldiers.

- **Ansar al-Jihad**

Ansar al-Jihad, or Helpers of Jihad, claimed one major attack in Tank in December 2023 on the police headquarters in the Tank district. The attack involved two suicide bombers, and resulted in

⁹⁰ Syed Fazl-e-Haider, "TJP: A front group for the Pakistani Taliban?", The Jamestown Foundation, August 21, 2023, <https://jamestown.org/program/tjp-a-front-group-for-the-pakistani-taliban/>

⁹¹ PIPS' interview with Sohail Khalid, DIG CTD KP, in Peshawar on September 4, 2023.

the loss of eight lives, including three policemen and five attackers, while injuring four policemen. Subsequent to the Tank attack, the group unveiled its organizational structure, proclaiming Mufti Zarrar Ansari as its leader. Additionally, it announced a six-member shura, or decision-making council, comprising the group leader, Mufti Iqbal, Maulana Yasir Wazir, Engineer Abdul Manan, and Maulana Ameer Ahmad Haqqani.⁹²

4.1.2 Baloch nationalist insurgent groups

In recent years, Baloch insurgents have intensified their efforts to amplify the impact of their attacks, primarily to put pressure on the government and garner international attention, among other motives. They have adopted strategies such as hitting high-value targets, termed 'political' targets by BLA commanders, and executing coordinated fidayeen (gun-and-suicide) assaults.

Moreover, Baloch insurgents seem to be broadening their operational scope beyond Balochistan, evidenced by attacks outside the region. For instance, the BLA targeted Chinese teachers at the Confucius Institute in Karachi University in April 2022, and a new Baloch group, BNA, launched an attack on security forces in Lahore's Anarkali bazaar in January same year.

Thirdly, there's a heightened focus of Baloch insurgents on southern and southwestern Balochistan, alongside a continued presence in the provincial capital, Quetta. Significant portions of the Baloch separatist insurgency have relocated to areas like Awaran and the Makran coastal belt, with proximity to the Gwadar Port, a critical node of the CPEC and BRI projects. Though Gwadar has historically been a peaceful district of Balochistan compared to other parts of the province, but the Baloch insurgents have developed significant presence in districts close to Gwadar mainly Kech, Panjgur and Awaran.

Furthermore, there are indications of operational collaboration between certain Baloch insurgent factions and Sindhi nationalist insurgents, particularly in Karachi and northern Sindh, bolstering their collective operational capabilities.

Moreover, the allure of groups like the TTP and IS-K is enticing the disenchanting Baloch youths, potentially complicating the Baloch militant landscape further in the coming months and years.

Finally, significant shifts have occurred within the Baloch insurgency. It is increasingly influenced by middle-class, educated youth less tethered to traditional tribal structures. Furthermore, leaders on the ground seem more intent on escalating the destructive potential of their terrorist activities, employing high-impact fidayeen and coordinated gun-and-bomb attacks, as cited earlier.

- **Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA)**

BLA is a banned sub-nationalist militant organization fighting against the Pakistani government for greater regional autonomy for the province of Balochistan. The group also seeks to establish a Baloch state "encompassing majority Baloch areas of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran. The BLA-Zeb group seeks independence from Pakistan and to rid the region from foreign exploitation and intervention."⁹³

The BLA is divided into two factions, each under the leadership of Harbiyar Marri and Bashir Zeb. Among these, the faction led by Bashir Zeb, known as the Bashir Zeb-led BLA, is particularly active and formidable in its attacks. It operates both independently and as part of BRAS (Baloch Raaji

⁹² <https://x.com/abdsayed/status/1736098224799162492?s=20>

⁹³ <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/balochistan-liberation-army>

Aajoi Sangar), an alliance comprising at least four Baloch insurgent groups. Bashir Zeb also heads the BLA's Majeed Brigade, established by the late Aslam Baloch, the group's predecessor. Hamal Rehan Baloch serves as the deputy to Bashir Zeb, with second-level commanders including Noor Baksh Mengal, Rehman Gul, and Agha Sher Dil. Buzgar Khan oversees the logistics unit. Local experts suggest that the BLA is structured into three units: operational, logistics, and intelligence. Jeevand Baloch serves as the group's spokesperson.

The BLA primarily operates in Baloch-populated regions of Balochistan and certain areas of Karachi. BLA-Marri maintains a significant presence in Ispalgai, Mastung district, as well as in Mach, Harnai, Nasirabad, Jaffarabad, Loralai, Quetta, and Awaran districts. On the other hand, BLA-Zeb focuses its activities mainly along the coastal belt and eastern Balochistan.

Over the past two years, the BLA has launched attacks spanning 22 districts of Balochistan, underscoring its wide presence and operational reach. However, the group has notably intensified its activities with more frequent attacks in Bolan, Harnai, Kalat, Kech, Khuzdar, Panjgur, Quetta, Sibi, Nushki, and Mastung within Balochistan, as well as in Karachi, Sindh.

The security forces, mega development projects and workers (including non-Baloch Pakistanis and foreigners mainly Chinese), state installations, and non-Baloch workers/settlers are among the key targets hit by the BLA.

- **Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF)**

Young nationalist activists Dr. Allah Nazar, Ghulam Muhammad Baloch, and Wahid Kamber formed the BLF in 2003. Initially, BLF collaborated with the BLA, seeking militant training for its members to bolster its armed resistance. Politically, BLF is aligned with the Balochistan National Movement (BNM), a Baloch political movement predominantly active among and led by the Baloch diaspora in the West.⁹⁴ BLF draws its primary support from the BNM and BSO-Azad.

The BLF represents a departure from traditional Baloch nationalist leadership, as it is spearheaded by middle-class educated Baloch youth, rather than tribal elites. Drawing its core support from activists of the BNM and the BSO-Azad, as noted earlier, the BLF operates independently of tribal chiefs. Its chief, Dr. Allah Nazar, enjoys close ties with BSO-Azad and BNM leaders, including Hamal Haider Baloch, who actively advocates for the Baloch cause on the international stage. Allah Nazar once remained part of the National Party (NP), led by Dr. Malik Baloch, the former chief minister of Balochistan. His whereabouts are subject to speculation, with some suggesting he shuttles between Iran and the Pakistani border region, where his family resides, while others believe he also maintains a hideout in Afghanistan.

Inside Pakistan, BLF's key leaders on the ground include Akhter Nadeem, Khaleel Baloch and Gwahram Baloch who is also spokesperson of the group. Buleda, a small valley and a Tehsil of Kech district, north of Turbat and bordering with Iran, is considered the headquarters of the group; Other areas of BLF influence and operations include: Mashkhel (Kharan), Awaran, Panjgur districts; Tung, Mand and Turbat (Kech district); Basima in Washuk district; and Jiwani and Pasni in coastal areas.

The BLF's operational focus is notably concentrated, with the group predominantly conducting attacks in five southern districts of Balochistan over the past two years: Gwadar, Kech, Lasbela,

⁹⁴ The BNM was a new name, after 1990, of the Balochistan National Youth Movement (BYNM) that was founded by Dr Abdul Malik Baloch in 1987 and was headed by Dr Abdul Haiy Baloch.

Panjgur, and Awaran. However, the group has sporadically been linked to attacks in Quetta and Karachi, Sindh, as well.

The group is extremely anti-China and anti-CPEC. Dr Allah Nazar, head of BLF asserts that they are fighting against Chinese involvement and that China and Pakistan are equally imperialists for the Baloch people. Dr. Nazar also believes like other insurgent leaders that there is nothing for Baloch and Balochistan in CPEC and Gwadar Port, and that China is colluding with Pakistan to further exploit Baloch resources.⁹⁵

- **BRAS (Baloch Raji Ajoi Sangar)**

BRAS, an alliance of Baloch separatist groups formed in late 2018, initially aimed to target Chinese interests in Pakistan. Comprising BLA, BLF, Baloch Republican Guards, and BNA, it has emerged as a significant force. However, BNA's influence waned following Imam Gulzar's arrest, leading to its departure from BRAS and the leveling of serious allegations against Baloch National Movement's former leadership, as well as BLA and BLF. The Baloch insurgent leaders who did not agree with the reconciliatory approaches of BLA and BRA leaders (i.e., Harbiyar Marri and Brahamdagh Bugti, respectively) towards the Pakistani government, have been either splintering and forming their own factions or coming together to form alliances like BRAS.

BRAS harbors strong anti-China and CPEC sentiments and poses a substantial threat in the Makran coastal belt and Quetta. Despite its narrow mandate, requiring members to contribute human resources and logistical support for joint attacks, member groups retain autonomy in pursuing their political and operational objectives.

In the lead-up to the 2024 general elections, the group intensified its activities, hitting numerous election-related targets across the province within a mere two-month span. According to the PIPS digital database, BRAS carried out 18 attacks in January and February 2024 across nine districts of Balochistan, targeting political leaders and workers, election-related assets, and security forces. However, the group itself claimed responsibility for a significantly higher number of attacks, reportedly four times the number documented in the PIPS database.

- **Baloch Republican Army (BRA)**

The BRA also known as Bugti Militia, consists of mainly Bugti tribesmen, largely those following Nawab Akbar Bugti. In the last few years, it has expanded its membership by recruiting volunteers in other parts of the province, mainly in Gwadar and Kech, where its fighters in many instances operated in close coordination with the BLF fighters. Pakistani security agencies claim BRA is the militant wing of the Baloch Republican Party (BRP) and Brahamdagh Bugti is running the group, which he denies.

- **United Baloch Army (UBA)**

The UBA is a splinter group of BLA.⁹⁶ Abdul Nabi Bangulzai, a hardliner commander who was expelled from BLA while attacking the civilians and looting the Baloch traders, leads the more lethal faction of the group. The Baloch insurgents usually avoided attacking the civilians, especially the Baloch, but Bangulzai believed that the Baloch elites, which do not support the separatists and are pro-federation, also deserved to be punished. Bangulzai later joined the BLF. The leader of the

⁹⁵ PIPS' telephonic conversation with Quetta-based journalist Shahzada Zulfiqar.

⁹⁶ Karlos Zurutuza, "Understanding Pakistan's Baloch insurgency", *The Diplomat*, June 24, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/06/cracking-pakistans-baloch-insurgency>

other faction of the group, Mehran Marri, who is based in London and often travels to the United Arab Emirate, has been running a campaign against Pakistan.

UBA mainly comprises Marri fighters but also has in ranks other fighters from Sarawan and Bolan regions. The group has presence in Chagai, Nushki, Bolan, Lasbela, and Basima in Washuk district.

- **Baloch Republican Guard (BRG)**

Bakhtiar Domki established the group following the assassination of his wife and daughter in Karachi in January 2012. Domki, who was married to the sister of Brahamdagh Bugti, reportedly lives in self-exile, reportedly in London. The group has been relatively inactive in recent years. It has main presence in the Nasirabad district of Balochistan. In 2023, the group claimed responsibility for two attacks, one in Quetta and the other in Sohbatpur, resulting in the death of one policeman and the injury of another. It is also part of BRAS, the alliance of Baloch separatist groups.

- **Lashkar-e-Balochistan (LeB)**

The LeB is another Baloch insurgent group, which has been least active in recent years. It was formed in 2008 and operates mainly in and around Makran region. Baloch analysts believe that LeB recruits fighters from the Mengal tribe and the Balochistan National Party (BNP-Mengal) sympathizers, a charge that the BNP denies asserting that it has no hand in the armed resistance. LeB is led by Mir Javed Mengal, elder brother of BNP chief Akhtar Mengal; Javed lives in exile in London and UAE. However, he denies any links with LeB. Javed Mengal and his son Mir Noorudin Mengal have been active in pleading the Baloch case at different international forums. Mir Noorudin Mengal has been active in UNPO (Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organizations) and has been instrumental in organizing some events in the US on the Balochistan issue.

Lashkar-e-Balochistan is primarily active in Lasbela, Makran, Khuzdar, and Panjgur.

- **Baloch National Army (BNA)**

Baloch Nationalist Army (BNA) suffered significant setbacks after its two main leaders recently renounced violence. Formed in 2022 through the merger of two Baloch insurgent groups, the UBA and a faction of the BRA, BNA aimed to bolster the Baloch resistance movement. However, following the renunciation of violence by its leaders from the path of violence, the group has become almost inactive.

Gulzar Imam, also known as Shambay, the founder of the banned BNA, made headlines on May 23, 2023, when he held a press conference in Quetta alongside government officials, expressing remorse for his past involvement in armed activities against the state. Many viewed Imam's arrest as a significant achievement, attributing it to the intelligence agencies' successful infiltration into the inner workings of the banned group. Security officials underscored that Imam's arrest marked a substantial milestone in the ongoing efforts to combat militancy in Balochistan. His arrest had been previously announced in an ISPR press release on April 7.⁹⁷

Following Imam Gulzar's arrest, the BNA severed ties with the Baloch insurgent groups' alliance BRAS and levelled serious allegations against the former leadership of the Baloch National Movement, as well as BLA and BLF. Subsequently, in December, Sarfraz Ahmed Bangulzai, also

⁹⁷ "Complex ISI operation successfully disarms top Baloch separatist," *The News*, May 24, 2023, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1073390-complex-isi-operation-successfully-disarms-top-baloch-separatist>

known as Mureed Baloch, a 'commander' and spokesman of the banned BNA, along with 70 associates, announced their surrender.⁹⁸

4.1.3 Sindhi nationalist insurgent groups

Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army (SRA) is the main Sindhi insurgent group operating in parts of interior Sindh and Karachi. It was established as a splinter of Sindhudesh Liberation Army (SLA) after a conflict on leadership emerged. A former leader of a Sindhi nationalist group Jeay Sindh Mutahidda Mahaz (JSMM), Syed Asghar Shah alias Sajjad Shah, who hails from Larkana, leads the group. The JSMM and the affiliated SLA is led by Shafi Barfat. JSMM was banned in 2013 and Shafi is on the list of wanted terrorists or the Red Book. The 2021 version of the Red Book also entailed the names of SRA head Asghar Shah as well as another three member of the group including Muhammad Hanif alias Billu Badshah, Sajjad Ali Mengju and Mashooq Qambrani alias Aushaq Sindhi. The Red Book describes Asghar Shah as mastermind of multiple terrorism acts in Sindh province including on Jamaat-e-Islami's Kashmir rally and Rangers officials deployed at Ehasas Programme office in Karachi, in 2020. Asghar Shah was arrested in 2005 and released after 5 years after which he quit JSMM and established his own group.

SRA and SLA describe themselves as followers of GM Syed, a Sindhi nationalist leader who initiated and led Jeay Sindh Movement. However, many Sindhi nationalists argue that GM Syed's movement believed in non-violence.

The SRA is also linked to the Baloch BRAS (nexus was formed in July 2020), which was especially designed to hit Chinese nationals, interests and CPEC. As mentioned earlier in the report, BRAS is an alliance of BLF, Bashir Zeb's BLA, and Bukhtiar Domki's BRG. After joining BRAS, SRA increased its attacks, which also hinted at enhanced funding and training for the group. Security forces also intensified crackdown against the group after it hit Chinese nationals and security forces.

In 2023, the SRA carried out four attacks including one in interior Sindh (Jamshoro) and three in Karachi, provincial capital of Sindh. Two of these attacks targeted police, and one attack each targeted a power transmission line and a non-Sindhi settler. One person (deputy director of a private school system and Federation of Private Schools Vice Chairman Syed Khalid Raza) was killed, and six policemen were injured in the attacks perpetrated by the SRA.

Meanwhile, while Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army remained more active in Sindh, a new Sindhi insurgent group, which calls itself Sindhudesh People's Army (SPA), claimed an attack that targeted a dental clinic run by a Chinese couple in Karachi. Over the past few years, Sindhi insurgent groups have been trying to be more assertive. There were reports that some of them even forged alliance with some Balochi insurgent groups. Still, the operational strength and threat of the Sindhi insurgent remains low to medium. But the emergence of new groups such as SPA is a sign of warning, especially for Pakistan's bilateral and multilateral economic and trade engagements in the province and country. Though little information is available about the SPA, but experts argue it could be a faction of either Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army or Jeay Sindh Qaumi Mahaz. Others hold that the use of a new name could be just an operational tactic employed by some old group in a way to get recognition and attention.

⁹⁸ Saleem Shahid, "Outlawed BNA 'commander' announces surrender," *Dawn*, December 21, 2023.

4.1.4 Violent sectarian groups

- **Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ)**

Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) is a Sunni sectarian radical group. It wants to transform Pakistan into a Sunni Muslim state primarily through use of violent means and armed struggle. LeJ is against the Shia community and declares them non-Muslim.

The group emerged in the mid-1990s, with its headquarters in Lahore, as an armed faction affiliated with the anti-Shi'a sectarian organization Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP). Its four co-founders—Riaz Basra, Malik Ishaq, Akram Lahori, and Syed Ghulam Rasool Shah—were prominent figures within SSP at the time.⁹⁹

The SSP officially denied any affiliation with Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. However, evidence from early suggested a close relationship between the two organizations, with LeJ members frequently seen in SSP's offices and madrassas. Despite their organizational differences, both groups share similar goals and objectives, primarily targeting Shia Muslims.

The LeJ commenced its operations in 1996, primarily targeting Shia government officials.

By 2001, the group had been implicated in hundreds of acts of terrorist violence. During the second phase of Nawaz Sharif's rule (1998-1999), LeJ suffered significant losses, with numerous members killed in police encounters. Despite the elimination or arrest of top leaders, LeJ's activities persisted. The restructuring of LeJ was primarily motivated by its collaboration with Al-Qaeda, Tehreek-e-Taliban, and other jihadist organizations with robust networks in the ex-FATA and KP. Additionally, LeJ draws substantial support from Deobandi madrassas and individuals sympathetic to its cause, facilitating recruitment efforts for the organization.

Since the initiation of the National Action Plan (NAP) in late 2014, security forces and law enforcement agencies have successfully targeted key commanders of violent sectarian groups, including Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ). For instance, on February 15, 2015, a prominent LeJ commander, Usman Saifullah Kurd, was killed along with an associate during a clash with paramilitary troops in Quetta. In July of the same year, LeJ chief Malik Ishaq, along with his two sons Usman and Haq Nawaz, and 11 other militants, were reportedly killed in a confrontation with police personnel in Muzaffargarh, Punjab. Furthermore, Haroon Bhatti, a founding member of the banned LeJ, was eliminated in Lahore on November 25, 2015, and two significant LeJ leaders, Jahangir Badini alias Ameer Sahab, and Salman Badini, met their end in security operations conducted in Balochistan in 2016 and 2018, respectively. Analysts speculate that the relative lack of public protest from sectarian groups and their leaders in response to these killings could be partly attributed to pressure from the NAP. Another explanation posits that the leaders of these groups refrained from protesting to avoid compromising their political image, particularly by advocating for individuals labelled as sectarian 'terrorists'.¹⁰⁰

The security operations and pressure from NAP effectively decimated the leadership and activities of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) for a period. However, in recent years, certain factions of LeJ seem to be regaining activity. For example, in 2023 alone, LeJ factions were responsible for six attacks across

⁹⁹ Abdul Sayed & Amira Jadoon, "Lashkar-e-Jhangvi's role in the Afghanistan-Pakistan militant infrastructure", Hudson Institute, March 30, 2023.

¹⁰⁰ "Strengthening governance in Pakistan," a joint report by FES Pakistan and Pak Institute for Peace Studies released in December 2020. It can be downloaded here: <https://www.pakpips.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/NAP-Final-from-Hamayun.pdf>

Pakistan, including four in Balochistan (Mastung and Quetta districts), and one each in Karachi and Gilgit-Baltistan. These attacks resulted in the loss of 16 lives and injuries to 27 others. Primarily targeting members of the Shia and Hazara communities, these attacks included the assassination of a local leader of the Pakistan Peoples Party, Amjad Husain, in Karachi, due to his Shia identity. Among the most severe incidents was the December 2023 attack in Chillas, where militants opened fire on a passenger bus on the Karakoram Highway, resulting in the deaths of 10 individuals, including two army soldiers, and injuring 26 others.

- **Sipah-e-Muhammad Pakistan and Zainabiyun Brigade**

Certain factions of Sipah-e-Mohammad Pakistan (SMP), a violent Shia group, along with a newly emerged Shia violent group called Zainabiyun Brigade, have been found involved in the targeted killings of members and supporters of Sunni groups like the banned Ahle Sunnat wal Jamaat, which is a reincarnation of the former SSP. These incidents have occurred predominantly in Karachi, as well as in parts of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in recent years.

In 2020, a faction of SMP was implicated in targeted attacks in Karachi. Law enforcement agencies also apprehended several associates of the group during three search operations conducted in the city that year. Among those detained were Saleem Haider Zaidi and other suspected militants linked to the banned Sipah-e-Mohammad Pakistan. These individuals were allegedly associated with the Agha Hasan group of Sipah-e-Mohammad, and had been actively involved in sectarian violence for the past two decades.¹⁰¹ Similarly, in January 2021, a CTD team arrested Amir Baz, Shahid, Musharraf Abbas, Bawaji and Adeel Abbas and two others linked with Sipah-i-Muhammad from Girot district of Khushab in Punjab.¹⁰²

On January 27, 2021, a joint operation conducted by the CTD and a federal institution in Khuda Ki Basti, Surjani Town, Karachi, resulted in the arrest of Abbas Jafri, a suspect affiliated with the Shia sectarian group Zainabiyun Brigade. Jafri, who specialized in handling automatic weapons, was allegedly involved in conducting reconnaissance for militants to facilitate terrorist activities in Karachi. During interrogation, it was revealed that he had indoctrinated several individuals and sent them to a neighboring country for militant training. According to a press release by the CTD, the detained suspect was also implicated in utilizing foreign-trained militants for terrorist operations.¹⁰³ Subsequently, on February 2, Syed Zakir Raza, also known as Nadeem, a militant associated with the Zainabiyun Brigade, was apprehended in Karachi; he was closely affiliated with Abbas Jafri. According to a media report, at least two additional associates of the Zainabiyun Brigade were also detained in the city during the first quarter of 2021. Additionally, the report highlighted concerns raised by Shia groups in Karachi, claiming that "over 200 Shia youths have allegedly been picked up by Pakistan's law enforcement agencies upon their return from Syria, Iran, and Iraq, with their whereabouts remaining unknown."¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ *Dawn*, December 22, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1597095/man-held-for-sectarian-killings-in-city>

¹⁰² *Dawn*, January 8, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1600255/seven-terrorists-held-in-khushab-with-arms-explosives>

¹⁰³ "Zainabiyoun militant' held in Surjani," *Dawn*, January 28, 2021.

¹⁰⁴ Zia Ur Rehman, "Pakistan's Shia mercenaries return from Syria, posing a security threat," TRT World, March 3, 2021, https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/pakistan-s-shia-mercenaries-return-from-syria-posing-a-security-threat-44655/amp?__twitter_impression=true

More recently, the CTD claimed to have arrested Syed Mohammed Mehdi in Karachi on January 20, 2024. Mehdi is reportedly affiliated with the Zainabiyun brigade and involved in several targeted killings including an attack on Mufti Taqi Usmani in 2019.¹⁰⁵

In 2023, *violent Shia groups* perpetrated seven attacks in Pakistan including six in Karachi and one in KP, which in all claimed nine lives and injured eight others.

4.2 Extended profiles of the TTP and IS-K

A. Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)

• Backgrounder

By mid-November 2001, it was evident that the Taliban's resistance against intense US air strikes was futile. Many Taliban members fled Afghan cities to regroup, finding refuge across the eastern border in Pakistan's former FATA region. This influx of militants, including both Taliban and Al-Qaeda, intensified along the Pak-Afghan border, as tribes provided them with sanctuary.¹⁰⁶

The Taliban and Al-Qaeda militants based in South Waziristan launched attacks against US troops and the Afghan government, leading to a Pakistani military operation in Wana in March 2004. The militants, holding US nationals and Afghan government officials as hostages, sought to negotiate the release of detainees from Afghan prisoners. After Pakistan Army halted the Wana operation, an agreement, known as the Shakai Agreement, was reached on March 27, 2004, emphasizing tribal assistance in registering foreigners and renouncing militancy.¹⁰⁷

Despite the accord, attacks on security forces continued, prompting the government to launch the Shakai operation. Nek Muhammad, a prominent militant, was killed in June 2004, but the resistance continued. Economic sanctions were imposed on tribes, yet attacks expanded into urban areas. In July 2004, military operations extended to areas inhabited by the Mehsud tribe, where some cooperated with authorities. However, attacks on security forces persisted. The abduction of Chinese engineers in October 2004 shifted tribal elders' stance, leading to negotiations and agreements. In the last week of November 2004, representatives of the Ahmedzai tribes and the government reached an agreement after protracted negotiations.

Meanwhile, North Waziristan emerged as a hub for foreign militants, with Pakistan Army suspecting a large presence of Al-Qaeda operatives in the region. Among them was Abu Furaij, a key Al-Qaeda figure wanted for his involvement in an assassination attempt on former President Pervez Musharraf. While he was eventually apprehended in May 2005 from Mardan district, North Waziristan remained his primary hideout.

The government extended military operations to North Waziristan in September 2005, targeting Mehsud tribes residing in the area. However, a peace agreement, known as the Sararogha agreement, was signed with Baitullah Mehsud on February 22, 2005, mirroring terms similar to those with the Ahmedzai tribes. Despite agreements, Baitullah's influence intensified, marked by oppressive measures such as enforcing the growth of beard among male tribesmen.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ *Dawn*, January 21, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1807350/suspect-linked-to-foreign-spy-outfit-arrested>

¹⁰⁶ Muhammad Amir Rana, et al., *Dynamics of Taliban insurgency in FATA* (Islamabad: PIPS, 2010).

¹⁰⁷ International Crisis Group, *Pakistan's Tribal Areas: Appeasing the Militants*, *Asia Report*, No. 125, December 11, 2006, p. 13.

¹⁰⁸ Muhammad Amir Rana, et al., *Dynamics of Taliban insurgency in FATA* (Islamabad: PIPS, 2010).

On September 5, 2006, a peace deal was signed between the government and local Taliban commanders in Miranshah, North Waziristan. While Pakistani Taliban militants adhered to a unilateral ceasefire since June 2006, skepticism persisted regarding the presence of foreign militants. Barely an hour after the agreement, a militant spokesman denied the presence of foreign militants and refuted claims of cross-border attacks on Afghan and coalition troops.

- **Brief history and development**

Following the Miranshah agreement in 2006, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) emerged as the leading and most organized militant group in Pakistan. Led by Baitullah Mehsud, the TTP formed an alliance of around 40 local militant groups in South Waziristan Agency in December 2007,¹⁰⁹ establishing Ladha as its headquarters. The group rapidly expanded its presence across former FATA agencies and frontier regions, and subsequently to almost whole of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, mainly in Peshawar, Nowshera, Charsadda, Hangu, Bannu, Lakki Marwat, Dera Ismail Khan, Kohat, Tank, Swat and Dir districts.¹¹⁰

As TTP attacks spread nationwide, the government banned the organization under the Anti-Terrorism Act on August 25, 2008, freezing its assets and sealing its offices. Baitullah Mehsud was killed in a US drone strike on August 5, 2009, triggering internal power struggles within the TTP. Amid infighting among Baitullah's deputies, Hakeemullah Mehsud emerged as the new TTP chief on August 23, 2009. While some speculate Al Qaeda's influence in the decision, TTP sources deny external involvement, asserting the group's autonomy. Hakeemullah, who later died in a US drone strike in 2013, worked to solidify his leadership and unite various TTP factions.¹¹¹ After Hakeemullah's death, Mullah Fazlullah of Swat was appointed as the new TTP chief by its shura.

The TTP, closely aligned with al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban, orchestrated some of Pakistan's deadliest terrorist attacks. The Peshawar school massacre in 2014 particularly stands out as a watershed moment that galvanized the Pakistani state and society against the group. As a result, concerted efforts by the Pakistani government, notably Operation Zarb-e-Azb launched in 2014, along with internal factors, led to the TTP's significant decline by 2016, limiting its capacity for attacks within Pakistan. Operation Zarb-e-Azb effectively dismantled the group from its stronghold in ex-FATA, forcing it to seek refuge in Afghanistan.

However, since 2017, the TTP has experienced a resurgence, marked by increased attacks, a renewed propaganda campaign, and closer ties to transnational jihadism. This resurgence was initially spurred by evolving relationships with regional militant groups, particularly the Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda.¹¹² The group's revival gained momentum following the Taliban's takeover of Kabul in August 2021.

Initially, the TTP positioned itself as an extension of the Afghan Taliban, aiming to support the latter's fight against the US and its allies, with aspiration to establish a sharia system in Pakistan. Over time, it changed its strategy as the group later claimed to have abandoned any regional or global agenda beyond Pakistan, possibly to alleviate international pressure on Pakistan to act against it; the TTP's collaboration with Al-Qaeda had already helped Pakistan in acquiring

¹⁰⁹ Hassan Abbas, "A Profile of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan," *CTS Sentinel*, January 2008, Vol. 1, Issue 2

¹¹⁰ Muhammad Amir Rana, et al., *Dynamics of Taliban insurgency in FATA* (Islamabad: PIPS, 2010), pp.80-84.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Amira Jadoon, "The evolution and potential resurgence of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan," United Institute of Peace Special Report No. 494, May 2021, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/sr_494-the_evolution_and_potential_resurgence_of_the_tehrik_i_taliban_pakistan.pdf

advanced US drone technology to combat the group. In 2018, the TTP officially removed calls for a “greater jihad” in Afghanistan and support for Al-Qaeda’s global agenda, indicating a change in focus. Similarly, to bolster its legitimacy, the TTP aligned some objectives with the political goals of certain Pakistani religio-political and ethnic parties, notably Baloch and Pashtun nationalists protesting discriminatory state policies.¹¹³

- **Goals and objectives**

Initially, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) articulated its goals as resistance against the Pakistan Army, enforcement of Shariah, and unity in operations against NATO forces in Afghanistan. However, over time, its agenda expanded to include the propagation of Sharia law not only in Pakistan but also beyond its borders. In a 2021 interview with CNN, the TTP’s leader, Noor Wali Mehsud, expressed a new objective: the establishment of an independent state in the border regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.¹¹⁴

In its most recent negotiations with the Pakistani government, which ultimately ended in failure, the TTP demanded the reversal of FATA’s status to its pre-merger state before integration with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This demand was intricately linked to the group’s ambition to establish a stronger presence in the region and run a parallel system there as it used to do before 2013. This marks a significant departure from previous goals and signals a shift towards territorial ambitions within Pakistan’s tribal areas.

In recent times, the TTP has also been endeavoring to bolster its ‘nationalistic’ image, following a similar path as the Afghan Taliban, in hopes of garnering support from Pashtun tribes across Afghanistan and Pakistan. This strategy has included refraining from attacking civilians, a move interpreted by some observers as part of this broader narrative. However, despite these efforts, the ground reality has shown a different outcome. People in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have adamantly rejected the return of TTP militants, demonstrating their disapproval through protests across various districts of the province.

- **Current strength**

The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) maintains an estimated strength of 4,000 to 6,000 fighters, primarily concentrated in Afghanistan’s eastern provinces like Nangarhar, Kunar, Logar, Paktika, Paktiya, and Khost. Its leader, Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, and deputy, Qari Amjad Ali, are situated in Paktika and Kunar provinces, respectively.¹¹⁵

Pakistan’s Special Representative on Afghanistan Asif Ali Durrani believes that the TTP has an estimated 5,000 to 6,000 militants within its ranks, most of them seeking refuge in Afghanistan. If we include their families, the total number swells to 70,000.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Abdul Sayed, "The evolution and future of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 21, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/12/21/evolution-and-future-of-tehrik-e-taliban-pakistan-pub-86051>

¹¹⁴ Umair Jamal, "The TTP has redefined its goals: should Pakistan be worried," *The Diplomat*, August 11, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/the-ttp-has-redefined-its-goals-should-pakistan-be-worried/>

¹¹⁵ The fourteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team of the UN Security Council’s 1988 Taliban Sanctions Committee, released on June 1, 2023, can be downloaded here: <https://www.longwarjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/UN-Sanctions-Monitoring-report-Afghanistan-14th.pdf>

¹¹⁶ Views expressed in Pak Institute for Peace Studies’ 12th quarterly consultation on “Afghan peace and reconciliation: Pakistan’s interests and policy options,” held in Islamabad on March 15, 2024. Report can be seen here: <https://www.pakpips.com/article/7949>

However, independent sources interviewed for this study contest these figures, estimating the combined total strength of TTP members inside Afghanistan and Pakistan to be between 15,000 to 20,000.¹¹⁷

- **Organizational and command structure**

As noted earlier, the TTP in recent years has undergone a significant organizational shift, moving from a decentralized tribal structure to a centralized model akin to the Afghan Taliban. The new structure features shadow provinces and central units overseeing various portfolios. The number of appointed 'officials' has increased substantially, with the addition of ministries, an intelligence directorate, a suicide brigade, and other administrative units. Leadership authority now rests with a council, which, in consultation with the emir, appoints shadow ministers. Ministries cover a range of areas including information, defense, and finance, among others, with oversight from a General Directorate of Intelligence.¹¹⁸

The 12 shadow provinces announced by the TTP correspond to the seven divisions of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, as well as Zhob division, a Makran and Kalat province in Balochistan, one for the Gilgit-Baltistan province, and two for Punjab.¹¹⁹

In regions outside its centralized structure, the TTP employs the "Dalgay" system, borrowed from the Afghan Taliban insurgency model. "Dalgay" has origins in Pashto meaning "group," adapted by the Taliban to signify a military unit. The TTP sets membership requirements for a "Dalgay," with a minimum of five members for urban areas and 12-25 members for tribal or shadow provinces. TTP's defense minister, Mufti Muzahim, claims the existence of over 400 "Dalgay" units in Pakistan.¹²⁰

One of the experts interviewed for this study held that there are more than 100 formations of the TTP in KP alone and there can be 5 to 20 members in one formation. These are not visible all the time and security forces have to launch search operations for which intelligence is required.¹²¹

¹¹⁷ Interviews with Aqeel Yousafzai, Peshawar-based journalist, and Colonel Afzal, CTD Punjab Intelligence Head.

¹¹⁸ Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming, "The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan after the Taliban's Afghanistan takeover," CTC Sentinel, May 2023, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-tehrik-i-taliban-pakistan-after-the-talibans-afghanistan-takeover/>

¹¹⁹ Muhammad Amir Rana, "Persisting TTP threats," *Dawn*, June 18, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1760382>

¹²⁰ Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming, "The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan after the Taliban's Afghanistan takeover," CTC Sentinel, May 2023.

¹²¹ PIPS' Interview with Imran Shahid, DIG CTD KP, in Peshawar on September 4, 2023.

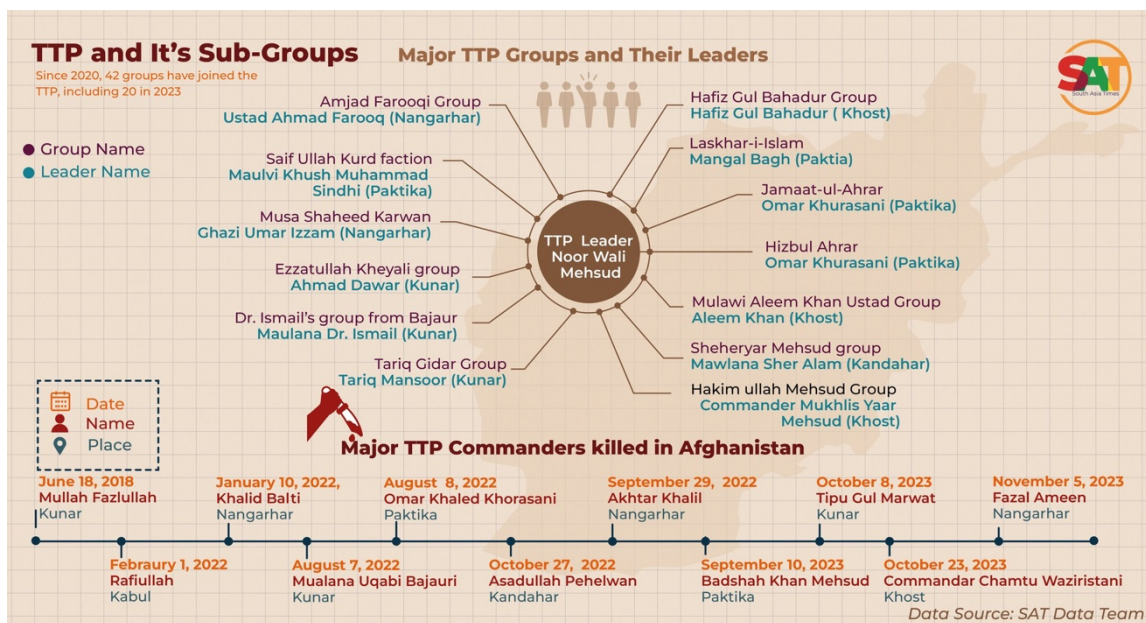


Figure 1. TTP and its subgroups (a. Major TTP groups and their leaders b. Major TTP commanders killed in Afghanistan)¹²²

• **Key leaders & leadership**

Noor Wali Mehsud, emir

Mufti Hazrat, and Qari Amjad Ali, deputies

Muhammad Khurasani, central spokesman of the TTP

One of Pakistan's leading law enforcement officials dealing with the TTP threat, asserted that the current strength of the TTP is far better than its past capabilities. Noor Wali Mehsud, its current leader, is noted for his strong ideological and intellectual acumen, distinguishing him from past leaders such as Baitullah Mehsud, Hakeemullah Mehsud, and even Maulana Fazlullah, whose ascendancy relied more on factors other than religious-ideological credentials. Mehsud's leadership presents the potential for sustaining the TTP as a formidable terrorist entity over an extended period. As an ideologue, he appears to enjoy amicable relations with top Taliban figures, including Hibatullah, renowned for his ideological fervor and strategic prowess in conflict resolution. Insights gleaned from Mehsud's writings suggest a nationalist orientation, advocating for the autonomy of tribal areas. There's a possibility that he might emulate the Afghan Taliban's model, endeavoring to metamorphose the Islamist TTP into a nationalist movement to spearhead a protracted insurgency. Mehsud demonstrates keen responsiveness to ideological narratives and exploits various socio-political dynamics in Pakistan through social media channels for organizational gain.¹²³

¹²² https://x.com/SATimes_TV/status/1724382518273884392?s=20

¹²³ PIPS' interview with Colonel Afzal, CTD Punjab Intelligence Head, in Lahore in September 2023.

Pakistan's Evolving Militant Landscape: State Responses and Policy Options

The TTP unveiled its new appointments for 2024, appointing governors for 12 shadow provinces, ministers for eight ministries, and two military commissions, as depicted in the image below along with the corresponding English translation that follows it.

تنشک بیلات
۱۴۴۵ھ بمطابق ۲۰۲۴ء

ریاست عمومی استخبارات محترم مفتی ابو منصور عاصم صاحب معاون محترم مولانا سلیم حفصانی صاحب	وزارت دفاع محترم مفتی مزاراحم صاحب	وزارت اقتصاد محترم مولانا بدری محسود صاحب	وزارت اطلاعات و نشریات محترم چوہدری منیب الرحمن صاحب
وزارت معارف محترم مولانا ابو حماد باجوڑی صاحب	وزارت فلاح و بہبود محترم سر ریگف مہمند صاحب	وزارت امور سیاسیہ محترم مفتی طارق محمود صاحب معاون محترم مفتی بوجدان سوہنی صاحب	اعلامی کمیسیون محترم مفتی غفران صاحب محترم قاری محمد شعیب صاحب محترم شیخ عبد الرحمن حماد صاحب محترم مولانا سلیم حفصانی صاحب
رئیس نظامی کمیسیون شمالی زون محترم مولانا شاہد عمر باجوڑی صاحب معاون: محترم عمر مکرم خراسانی صاحب اداری: مولانا تاقب الاسلام جیروی صاحب دیگر اراکین نظامی کمیسیون محترم مولانا قاری کاروان صاحب محترم عثمانی صاحب محترم حافظ اسد اللہ صاحب	رئیس نظامی کمیسیون جنوبی زون محترم مولانا نوری صاحب معاون: محترم قاضی مفتی نعمت اللہ صاحب محترم قاضی مفتی ارشد اقبال صاحب مولانا قاضی عبدالحکیم صدیقی صاحب مرافعہ (شمالی زون) محترم قاضی مولانا عبدالحکیم صاحب محترم قاضی مولانا شیخ خالد صاحب محترم مولانا روح الامین صاحب مرافعہ (جنوبی زون) محترم مولانا قاضی محمد امیر صاحب محترم قاضی مفتی شفیق صاحب ابتدائیہ (شمالی زون) محترم قاضی مفتی منصور صاحب محترم قاضی مفتی محمد خالد صاحب مولانا ہارون صاحب ابتدائیہ (جنوبی زون) محترم قاضی ابو ذکوان صاحب محترم قاضی مولانا طلحہ صاحب محترم قاضی مولانا فقیر محمد وزیر صاحب ابتدائیہ (جنوبی زون) محترم قاضی مفتی عبد الرحمن صاحب محترم قاضی مفتی مشام صاحب محترم قاضی مولانا اسد احمد صاحب ابتدائیہ (جنوبی زون) محترم قاضی مفتی عبد الرحمن صاحب محترم قاضی مفتی مشام صاحب محترم قاضی مولانا اسد احمد صاحب	مسئول اسپیشل استیضہ ای فوریس محترم مولانا مخلص صاحب	مسئول معسکر افاروق شمالی زون محترم استاد سمندر صاحب
مسئول معسکر افاروق جنوبی زون محترم حمزہ سنہنی صاحب	ولایت ملانڈ والی صاحب: محترم مولانا عظمت اللہ صاحب معاون والی: محترم ڈاکٹر برہان صاحب اراکین ولایتی کمیسیون: محترم مولانا فاروق صاحب محترم مولانا صیبت اللہ صاحب محترم مفتی سجاد صاحب مبارک صاحب محترم مولانا حکیم جالہ صاحب رئیس استخبارات: محترم فریضی استاد صاحب رئیس اقتصاد: محترم سلمان صاحب رئیس معارف: محترم مولانا کابیل صاحب رئیس فلاح و بہبود: محترم مولانا محمد طاہر صاحب	ولایت پشاور والی صاحب: محترم مولانا سیف اللہ حفصانی صاحب معاون والی: محترم خالد منصور قاری فریدی صاحب اراکین ولایتی کمیسیون: محترم ابراہیم حاجی صاحب محترم حاجی کامران صاحب محترم مولانا مایر صاحب محترم قاری کامران صاحب محترم عبد الرحمن صاحب رئیس استخبارات: محترم قاری معاویہ صاحب رئیس اقتصاد: محترم انیس اسحاق صاحب رئیس معارف: محترم مولانا حسین احمد صاحب رئیس فلاح و بہبود: محترم قاری ہدایت اللہ صاحب	ولایت بلوچ والی صاحب: محترم مولانا ذوالفقار وزیر صاحب معاون والی: محترم حیدر صاحب اراکین ولایتی کمیسیون: محترم شوکت وزیر صاحب محترم احمد داؤد محترم احمد طور محترم زبیر مروت صاحب رئیس استخبارات: محترم آصف صاحب رئیس اقتصاد: محترم حافظ احسان اللہ صاحب رئیس معارف: مولانا محبت الرحمن صاحب رئیس فلاح و بہبود: مولانا احمد شریعتی صاحب
ولایت گلگت و بلتستان والی صاحب: محترم سید غزوان غازی صاحب معاون والی: محترم اظہار صاحب	ولایت مکران و قلات والی صاحب: محترم شاہین بلوچ صاحب	ولایت تریپلہ والی صاحب: محترم مولانا جاسم حسین صاحب معاون والی: محترم ابو یاسر صاحب اراکین ولایتی کمیسیون: محترم مولانا مسرور صاحب محترم مولانا جاوید پنتی صاحب محترم زاہد گڈا پور صاحب محترم ملنگ استرالی صاحب محترم عبد اللہ شاہ صاحب محترم مولانا ابو عثمان صاحب رئیس استخبارات: محترم مولانا اخلص بار صاحب رئیس اقتصاد: محترم عاجز صاحب رئیس معارف: محترم مولانا ناصر صاحب رئیس فلاح و بہبود: محترم قاری شاہ خالد صاحب	ولایت خیبر پختونخوا رئیس استخبارات: محترم مولانا محمود صاحب رئیس اقتصاد: محترم مولانا خالد صاحب رئیس معارف: مولانا صلاح الدین شیرانی صاحب رئیس فلاح و بہبود: محترم مولانا خالد صاحب
ولایت پنجاب والی صاحب: محترم عمر معاویہ صاحب	مجموعہ التنفیذ شمالی زون محترم عبد الوہاب صاحب	مجموعہ التنفیذ جنوبی زون محترم مولوی اخلص صاحب	

تحریر پاکستان
HTTPS://UMARMEDIA.TTP.ORG

Figure 2. TTP's formations¹²⁴

General Directorate of Intelligence Head: Abu Mansoor Deputy Head: Maulana Saleem Haqqani
Defense Ministry Head: Mufti Muzahim
Ministry of Education Head: Maulana Abu Hamad Bajauri
Ministry of Public Welfare Head: Sarbakaf Mohmand
Ministry of Accountability Head: Ustaz Hanif Farooqi
Ministry of Economy Head: Maulana Badri Mehsud
Ministry of Political Affairs Head: Mufti Tariq Mehmood Deputy Head: Mufti Borjan Swati
Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Head: Chaudhry Muneeb Ur Rehman Jutt
Declaration Commission Members: Mufti Ghufuran, Qari Muhammad Shoaib, Sheikh Abdul Rehman Hamad, Maulana Saleem Haqqani
Military Commission (Northern Zone) Head: Maulana Shahid Omar Bajauri Deputy Head: Umar Mukarram Khorasani Administrative Official: Maulana Saqib Islam Dirwi Other Members: Maulana Qari Karvan, Usmani, Hafiz Asadullah
Military Commission (Southern Zone) Head: Maulana Noor Ullah Deputy Head: Maulana Inamullah Wazir Administrative Official: Maulana Abdul Samad Haqqani Other Members: Maulana Qazi Muhammad Ameer, Qari Irfan Afridi, Naseeb Nawaz

¹²⁴ <https://x.com/abdsayedd/status/1742966022955536591?s=20>

Pakistan's Evolving Militant Landscape: State Responses and Policy Options

Judiciary

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- **Operations, targets, and attack tactics**

Between January 1, 2021, and April 15, 2024, the TTP has carried out a total of 357 attacks across 37 districts of Pakistan. These attacks claimed the lives of 635 persons, including 437 personnel of security and law enforcement agencies, 96 civilians, as well as 102 militants, who were either suicide bombers or were killed in retaliatory for by security forces.

The majority of these attacks, totaling 317, occurred in KP, with 27 in Balochistan, 10 in Punjab and Islamabad, and three in Karachi.

Table 6: Attacks by TTP in Pakistan (Jan. 1, 2021-Apr. 15, 2024)

District	Attacks	Killed	Injured
Bajaur	9	28	31
Bannu	27	17	12
Buner	1	1	1
Charsadda	4	5	3
Chitral	1	16	47
D.I Khan	46	65	91
Hangu	4	9	0
Karak	1	0	1
Khyber	30	34	47
Kohat	7	5	16
Kohistan	1	14	28
Kurram	1	0	2
Lakki Marwat	29	39	25
Lower Dir	2	0	8
Mardan	6	8	4
Mohmand	2	3	0
North Waziristan	71	117	114
Nowshera	2	4	0
Orakzai	3	4	7
Peshawar	23	102	236
Shangla	1	0	0
South Waziristan	27	49	53
Swabi	2	2	7
Swat	4	11	2
Tank	13	20	55

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KP Total	317	553	790
Khanewal	1	2	0
Mianwali	2	3	0
Rawalpindi	3	3	5
Islamabad	4	8	11
Punjab & Islamabad Total	10	16	16
Pishin	3	3	0
Qilla Abdullah	11	18	43
Qilla Saifullah	1	0	0
Quetta	9	24	90
Sherani	1	5	1
Washuk	1	2	1
Zhob	1	7	0
Balochistan Total	27	59	135
Karachi	3	7	21
Sindh Total	3	7	21
Total Pakistan	357	635	962

More than 85 percent of the attacks perpetrated by the banned TTP targeted personnel, vehicles, and posts or stations of security and law enforcement agencies, mainly hitting the Pakistan army and the police. Sixteen attacks specifically targeted polio vaccination teams and their police escorts, while another 14 attacks aimed at tribal elders. The TTP also sporadically hit other targets, as outlined in the table below.

Table 7: Targets hit in TTP attacks

Targets	No. of attacks	Killed	Injured
Security/law enforcement agencies (personnel, convoys, posts)	305	557	870
Education/institutions/teachers	5	1	1
Govt. officials/institutions/symbols	3	5	1
Tribal elders and former peace committees members	4	6	0
Civilians	2	9	16
Political leaders/workers	3	1	4
NGO / civil society members	1	4	1
Alleged spy or collaborator	2	3	0
Health/polio workers, security escorts	16	13	15
Pro-govt tribesmen/peace committee members	10	14	4
CPEC/workers/Chinese	1	14	28
Development, exploration projects, companies, workers	3	6	15
Census team/security escort	2	2	7
Total	357	635	962

In carrying out the said 357 attacks, the group has employed mainly firing (hit and run, ambush and assault attacks) in 231 instances, besides carrying out 21 suicide blasts, 19 hand grenade attacks, 60 IEDs blasts, 18 gun and bomb coordinated attacks, five rocket attacks, one mortar shelling, and one incident each of sabotage and kidnapping.

The influx of U.S. weapons has bolstered the military capabilities of both the TTP militant group and ethnic Baloch separatist factions engaged in insurgencies against the Pakistani government. This surge in violence has been notable over the past two years. According to a March 2023 report published by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, following the United States' withdrawal of its forces from Afghanistan in 2021, an estimated \$7 billion worth of military equipment and weaponry, spanning firearms, communications equipment, and armoured vehicles, was left behind. According to the report, the Afghan Taliban seized these arms amid the tumultuous U.S. withdrawal.¹²⁵ Similarly, apart from claims made by investigators and law enforcers, social media posts from journalists in KP have also asserted that TTP militants utilized night vision sniper rifles in their attacks on police stations across multiple districts.

- **Recruitment and training**

The TTP has been mainly recruiting from the former FATA. It provides various types of training, including marine training, in camps currently located inside Afghanistan. Recent discussions among experts have raised concerns about the involvement of Afghan Taliban fighters in TTP's ranks and their involvement in cross-border attacks within Pakistan. Security forces have discovered numerous Afghan nationals participating in TTP attacks inside Pakistan. There are suggestions that some individuals from the Afghan Taliban, who were trained in bordering regions of KP and Balochistan, are currently operating within TTP assault teams.

However, the TTP faces challenges in recruiting within Pakistan as much of its militant infrastructure was relocated to Afghanistan after 2014.¹²⁶

- **Ideological propagation**

The TTP has been actively propagating its ideology through various means such as publications, social media, and the issuance of fatawa (plural of fatwa, or religious decree). In its early stages, the TTP also employed methods such as distributing pamphlets and night letters, in addition to graffiti, to disseminate its messages among tribesmen in the former FATA region.

However, the recent updated and innovative efforts, including the use of the TTP's Umar media as well as social media platforms, are particularly linked to the rise of its current leader, Noor Wali Mehsud. Unlike previous leaders of the TTP, Mehsud portrays himself as a religious scholar and a mufti (jurist). He has authored several works and continues to oversee the TTP's publication wing.¹²⁷

The TTP's persistent ideological propagation include efforts to reach out to segments of Pakistani society including Baloch youths. For instance, in 2023, TTP's Umar Media released an 8-minute video in Balochi and Urdu languages focusing on Balochistan, titled "A glimpse of continuing state oppression against the Baloch people." The video featured a speech by Commander Aslam Baloch from Nushki, Balochistan, who joined the TTP in 2022. He accused the Pakistani state of being responsible for various ongoing social and economic issues in the province.¹²⁸

¹²⁵ Abubakar Siddique, "Pakistani armed groups obtain U.S. weapons left behind in Afghanistan," RFE/RL, March 29, 2023, https://www.rferl.org/a/pakistan-armed-groups-obtain-us-weapons-left-in-afghanistan/32340664.html#0_8_10089_8766_2710_247182806

¹²⁶ PIPS' interview with Majid Nizami, senior journalist, in Lahore on September 5, 2023.

¹²⁷ Iqbal Singh Sevea, "Developing an ideology: Evolution of the Pakistani Taliban," ISAS Briefs, February 7, 2023, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/developing-an-ideology-evolution-of-the-pakistani-taliban>

¹²⁸ <https://twitter.com/Khurasandiary/status/1618642933879799808>

Likewise, the TTP, along with its ideologues and supporters, including those active on social media, vehemently responded to a decree issued by the renowned Pakistani scholar Mufti Taqi Usmani. In his decree, Mufti Taqi Usmani stated that those engaging in conflict against the Pakistani state and its agencies are considered 'rebels,' and their actions are forbidden or haram according to Islamic law.¹²⁹ In an audio statement, TTP chief Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud responded to Mufti Taqi Usmani, presenting religious arguments to justify the legitimacy of the anti-state conflict in Pakistan post-9/11 and providing "facts about the recent negotiations with the [Pakistani] government." Mehsud extended an invitation to Usmani for a debate on his decree and asserted that the TTP had never agreed to disarm in the event of a peace deal. He further claimed that TTP militants initiated the post-9/11 anti-state conflict in response to a religious edict issued by 500 religious leaders, including Deobandi superiors of Usmani.¹³⁰

Pro-TTP Twitter accounts also launched a campaign against the renowned scholar Mufti Muhammad Taqi Usmani. For one, the spokesperson for Jabhat Ansar al-Mahdi Khurasan criticized Mufti Taqi Usmani's fatwa and claimed that his opinions "had no substance according to Shariah."¹³¹ Similarly, a religious ideologue of Pakistani Taliban Shaikh Gul Muhammad Bajauri issued an audio statement strongly criticizing Usmani statement and challenged him to have a debate on the subject under the mediation of the Afghan Taliban.¹³² In Afghanistan, leading Deobandi religious scholar from Logar, Mufti Zahid Azizkhel declared the statement of Mufti Usmani as wrong and misled.¹³³

The banned TTP has also started to publish an Urdu magazine for the female, titled "Women's jihad", with articles urging women to support the armed jihad. One section of the first issue also included the details on the TTP attacks as reported by the group's Umar media.

- **Group affiliations/nexuses**

The group has close association with the Afghan Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and factions of some Central Asian groups. In Pakistan, it has developed nexuses with different local groups in tribal belt as well as in Punjab, Karachi, and Balochistan. In recent years, 42 different militant groups, including 4 from Balochistan, have joined the TTP. One expert argued that the TTP has to some extent formed a nexus with the BLA as well, but no evidence is available.¹³⁴

Law enforcement officials assert that Tehrik-e-Jihad Pakistan (TJP), responsible for multiple recent attacks, is merely a cover name for the TTP. Similarly, while leaders of Jamaatul Ahrar (JuA) may have differences with the TTP, they still engage in joint operations, behaving as a unified entity.¹³⁵

Most observers in Pakistan perceive the TTP and Afghan Taliban as two sides of the same coin, with the madrassa factor being a primary connection between the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban.¹³⁶ According to Dr. Qibla Ayaz, Chairperson of the Council of Islamic Ideology, both the TTP and the TTA (Tehreek-e-Taliban Afghanistan) pledge allegiance to the same emir, Hibatullah. The TTP has

¹²⁹ "Those fighting against state, agencies are rebels: Mufti Taqi Usmani," *The Express Tribune*, January 24, 2023, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2397401/those-fighting-against-state-agencies-are-rebels-mufti-taqi-usmani>

¹³⁰ <https://twitter.com/abdsayedd/status/1619205826782326784>

¹³¹ For details, visit: <https://minutemirror.com.pk/pro-ttp-twitter-accounts-launch-campaign-against-mufti-taqi-usmani-87865/>

¹³² <https://twitter.com/abdsayedd/status/1618545214385422337>

¹³³ <https://twitter.com/abdsayedd/status/1618325041166581760>

¹³⁴ PIPS interview with Shaukat Ali, SSP CTD [Intelligence] Balochistan in Quetta on September 7, 2023.

¹³⁵ PIPS' interview with Sohail Khalid, DIG CTD KP, in Peshawar on September 4, 2023.

¹³⁶ PIPS' interview with Majid Nizami, senior journalist, in Lahore on September 5, 2023.

provided support to the TTA in Pakistan, and its members have also fought alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan against both foreign and Afghan forces. These shared factors contribute to a strong mutual bond and respect between the two groups. While the Taliban may currently refrain from using force against the TTP, over time, viable solutions may emerge for Pakistan and Afghanistan to address the TTP issue collaboratively.¹³⁷

The Taliban have long maintained strong ties with Pakistani groups. The Haqqanis and Peshawar Shura, for instance, heavily depended on foreign fighters during their years of conflict. While they primarily recruited Pakistanis, reports indicate that in the summer of 2014, they deployed 3,500 fighters as part of a contingent of 9,500 madrassa volunteers from Pakistan. Additionally, the Taliban have fostered close relationships with terror outfits affiliated with Al-Qaeda, including the TTP and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, among others.¹³⁸

A UNSC report in 2024 also noted that the Taliban sympathize with TTP aims. In addition to supplying weapons and equipment, Taliban members, along with Al-Qaeda core and AQIS fighters, assisted TTP forces in cross-border attacks. Despite Taliban instructions for TTP fighters to stay within Afghanistan, many engaged in operations outside the country without facing consequences. Some Taliban members also joined TTP out of a perceived religious obligation to provide support. The report also highlighted that TTP members and their families regularly receive aid packages from the Taliban.¹³⁹

Similarly, Al-Qaeda and its South Asian chapter (AQIS) continue to provide training, ideological guidance, and support to the TTP. In July 2023, Al-Qaeda instructed all vehicles used by the group to be transferred to TTP due to fears of being targeted by the United States of America. Additionally, with approval from senior Al-Qaeda leaders, AQIS handpicked approximately 15 commanders to aid TTP in carrying out attacks in Pakistan. Furthermore, in September 2023, AQIS allegedly supplied armed fighters during the TTP attack in Chitral, Pakistan.¹⁴⁰

Simultaneously, some social media posts in February 2024 suggested that two significant Pakistani Taliban groups, namely Hafiz Gul Bahadur group and Lashkar-e-Islam, are merging with the banned TTP.¹⁴¹ This merger, if materializes, is feared to bolster the TTP's operational capabilities. However, beyond operational collaboration, disagreements regarding target selection could persist within the TTP factions. Presently, the TTP tends to refrain from targeting civilians, yet the HGB and LI may not fully align with this stance. A similar contradiction already exists within the TTP itself, between its core leadership and the Jamaatul Ahrar faction.

Meanwhile, individuals with criminal backgrounds and fugitives also join the TTP, leveraging their local knowledge to facilitate attacks and orchestrate extortion or kidnapping for ransom.¹⁴²

- **Financial sources**

¹³⁷ Interview by PIPS in Islamabad on September 12, 2023.

¹³⁸ Antonio Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War 2001-2021* (London: Hurst & Company, 2019).

¹³⁹ Thirty-third report of the UNSC's Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team released on January 23, 2024. The report can be downloaded here: < <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4035877?v=pdf> >

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Afghan Analyst tweeted on X:

<https://twitter.com/AfghanAnalyst2/status/1762743366293320145?t=C1SXZp8tNLgkPwCiVc9Dw&s=08>

¹⁴² PIPS' Interview with Imran Shahid, DIG CTD KP, in Peshawar on September 4, 2023.

The TTP primarily finances its operations through donations, extortion, and natural resource extraction.¹⁴³ Narcotics, smuggling, non-custom paid vehicles, and kidnapping for ransom are other sources. Militants have insiders in banks to extract data about the people for ransom demands.¹⁴⁴

An expert interviewed for this study argued TTP gets financial support from Afghanistan.¹⁴⁵ Pakistan's Special Representative on Afghanistan Ambassador Asif Durrani recently claimed Pakistan had evidence that "TTP is getting money from India through Afghan proxies". He said TTP had 5,000 to 6,000 militants in its cadres taking shelter in Afghanistan, adding, "If we include their families, then the number goes up to 70,000." He said that it was apparent the interim Afghan government could not afford the per-day expenditure of such a large number of people, which meant that someone else was paying for their upkeep.¹⁴⁶

Militants are also involved in drugs smuggling and any activity that brings easy money. They need to finance their sleeper cells in mountains or deserts for longer times.¹⁴⁷

- **Ideology**

The TTP is ideologically a Deobandi group,¹⁴⁸ with larger ideological affiliation with the Afghan Taliban. Both the TTP and the Taliban adhere to the Deobandi school of Islam, which does not inherently prescribe a fixed political structure for Islam. Instead, they base the political framework of their perceived 'caliphate' on their interpretation of Sharia law and Islamic tradition.

TTP is introducing a new ideological dimension to the militant landscape, making the ongoing effort to delineate the contours and nature of the caliphate an important intervention. This was underscored when the TTP released a video featuring Mehsud addressing Muslim scholars of Pakistan, wherein he justified the movement's militant campaign in Islamic terms. Essentially, Mehsud was initiating a munazara – a debate among religious scholars on theological matters. Subsequently, several prominent Islamic scholars in Pakistan issued statements and fatwas, as mentioned earlier, rejecting Mehsud's arguments and condemning the TTP's violent campaign.¹⁴⁹

Similarly, as mentioned previously, the group is incorporating nationalistic elements into its character, which has predominantly been ideological thus far. This shift seems to be part of a strategy to garner public support and emulate the approach of the Afghan Taliban.

- **Political views**

Like most religiously-inspired militant groups such as Al-Qaeda, IS-K, and even the Afghan Taliban, The TTP does not believe in democracy, man-made legislation or constitution, and the political and economic systems of modern nation states. However, it exhibits preferences and

¹⁴³ "Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan," National Counterterrorism Center, October 2022,

https://www.dni.gov/nctc/ftos/ttp_fto.html

¹⁴⁴ PIPS' Interview with Syed Irfan Ashraf, Assistant Professor at the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Peshawar, on September 5, 2023.

¹⁴⁵ PIPS' interview with Sohail Khalid, DIG CTD KP, in Peshawar on September 4, 2023.

¹⁴⁶ Views expressed in Pak Institute for Peace Studies' 12th quarterly consultation on "Afghan peace and reconciliation: Pakistan's interests and policy options," held in Islamabad on March 15, 2024. Report can be seen here: <<https://www.pakpips.com/article/7949>>

¹⁴⁷ PIPS' Interview with Imran Shahid, DIG CTD KP, in Peshawar on September 4, 2023.

¹⁴⁸ Jamestown Foundation, "Pakistani Taliban widen the civil war against fellow Deobandis," April 14, 2023, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4dad7e982.html>

¹⁴⁹ Iqbal Singh Sevea, "Developing an ideology: Evolution of the Pakistani Taliban," ISAS Briefs, February 7, 2023, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/developing-an-ideology-evolution-of-the-pakistani-taliban>

aversions towards various political parties in Pakistan based on its strategic goals within the country. For example, the TTP would not mind commending a political party that is seen as anti-army or supportive of dialogue with the group. For instance, the group had recently urged Pakistan's opposition political parties to reassess their nonviolent approach, suggesting that a stronger stance may be necessary to curb the military's interference in politics.

Likewise, the TTP issued a stark warning to the country's primary ruling parties in the outgoing PDM government, threatening "concrete action" against their top leadership for what it perceived as a declaration of war against the group. TTP spokesman Muhammad Khurasani had stated that if these parties persisted in their stance of refusing to engage in dialogue with the TTP and launching anti-TTP operations, action would be taken against their leaders. The TTP's statement also cautioned Pakistan's religion-based political parties, urging them not to align with any actions against the group. This threat surfaced two days following a resolution by Pakistan's highest security body, the National Security Committee (NSC), affirming a "zero-tolerance" policy toward terrorism in the country and pledging to confront any entities resorting to violence.¹⁵⁰

Despite significant ideological disparities, the TTP has aligned itself with Pashtun and Baloch nationalists in Pakistan. Notably, while Baloch nationalists tend to be secular, the TTP has targeted groups like the ANP in KP. TTP leaders have also voiced support for the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement, despite its opposition to the Taliban. Additionally, the TTP had endorsed the nationwide protests led by Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP). That was noteworthy considering the sectarian differences between the TTP, rooted in the Deobandi sect, and the TLP, which follows the Sunni Bareilvi sect. These endorsements highlight the TTP's efforts to stay relevant in contemporary political discussions.¹⁵¹

- **Support base**

As discussed in the section on TTP's affiliations and nexuses, the Afghan Taliban continue to provide significant support to the TTP, offering them a safe haven. Moreover, the TTP enjoys considerable popularity in Afghanistan, drawing support from both Taliban and non-Taliban factions due to a shared animosity towards Pakistan. Furthermore, there are instances of Taliban fighters joining the TTP, with reports indicating that some recent bombers may be of Afghan origin.¹⁵² Along with support from the Afghan Taliban, the TTP has been receiving "significant backing" from Al Qaeda and other militant factions for its operations in Pakistan.¹⁵³

The TTP has lost the public support it used to enjoy before 2013. Still, some religious groups, institutions, and individuals provide ideological and financial support to the TTP.

However, the TTP is reportedly well entrenched with Pashtun communities living on the other side of the border, mainly in Kunar, Paktika and other adjacent provinces of Afghanistan.

¹⁵⁰ The NSC, which counted Shahbaz Sharif and newly appointed military chief General Asim Munir among its members, convened for a two-day meeting on December 30, 2022, and January 2, 2023, to evaluate Pakistan's security landscape. [Source: Abid Hussain, "Pakistan Taliban threatens top political leadership including PM," Aljazeera, January 4, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/4/pakistan-taliban-threatens-top-political-leadership-including-pm>]

¹⁵¹ Abdul Sayed, "The evolution and future of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 21, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/12/21/evolution-and-future-of-tehrik-e-taliban-pakistan-pub-86051>

¹⁵² Asfandyar Mir, et al., "Is Pakistan poised to take on the TTP," USIP, February 14, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/02/pakistan-poised-take-ttp>

¹⁵³ "TTP backed by Al Qaeda, Afghan Taliban: UN", *Dawn*, February 1, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1810228/ttp-backed-by-al-qaeda-afghan-taliban-un>

- **State response**

Pakistan's response to the recent resurgence of the TTP appears inconsistent. Initially, it sought a negotiated peace deal with the TTP through the Taliban but is now solely relying on kinetic actions against the group, setting aside the prospects of talks.

Pakistan is also exerting pressure on the Afghan Taliban to take action against the TTP, and many observers see Pakistan's recent repatriation of Afghan refugees in the same context. At the same time, Pakistan is trying to engage with the Taliban diplomatically, but the latter are least interested in talking on the TTP issue and prefer to engage on issues related to trade and economy and border coordination, etc.

Additionally, Pakistan's response is shaped by its deteriorating economy, which limits its military options. Although there's some pressure for cross-border airstrikes, economic constraints and the risk of escalation, particularly with reports of Taliban fighters joining the TTP, may deter Pakistan from pursuing such operations.¹⁵⁴

Given that kinetic actions against the TTP currently constitute the primary state response, it is encouraging that law enforcement and security agencies have developed an updated threat perception concerning the TTP and other militant groups. Interviews conducted by PIPS revealed a shift in threat perception among law enforcement personnel, particularly within the CTD. Following the 2014 TTP attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar, there's a reduced skepticism regarding the religious and ideological motives of militant groups.

However, despite efforts to enhance intelligence capabilities, CTDs lack clarity on group dynamics and operational strategies, often relying on popular beliefs and media for information. This leads to discrepancies in threat perceptions, as seen in differing views within the CTD across provinces. While operational capabilities have improved, there's a need for better analysis to reduce dependency on premier intelligence agencies.

- **Government's talks with the TTP**

Pakistani government remained engaged in negotiations with the TTP, which were doomed from the outset. Despite a possible pressure from Pakistan, the Afghan Taliban were unlikely to take any military action against the TTP and only played an advisory or mediatory role in talks with the TTP. Also, there was a possible divide within the Taliban ranks over TTP negotiation. Some members of the Taliban explicitly criticized the Pakistani state for being non-Islamic, supporting TTP's agenda of establishing a Taliban-like Shariah based government in Islamabad.

The rumors of Kabul's de-facto government's role in bringing the Pakistani government and the TTP to the negotiating table started soon after the release of TTP prisoners by the Afghan Taliban in August 2021. By late September 2021, Pakistani government officials were talking about their desire to settle issues with the TTP at the table and offered amnesty to the militant group. On 1st October 2021, former Prime Minister Imran Khan admitted in an interview with TRT that his government had started a "reconciliation process" with "some" factions of the Taliban.¹⁵⁵ However, the TTP leadership rejected Islamabad's claims of talks, rebuffed amnesty offers, and

¹⁵⁴ Asfandiyar Mir, et al., "Is Pakistan poised to take on the TTP," USIP, February 14, 2023.

¹⁵⁵ "Islamabad in talks with groups of Pakistani Taliban, PM Khan reveals", TRT World, October 1, 2021, <<https://www.trtworld.com/asia/islamabad-in-talks-with-groups-of-pakistani-taliban-pm-khan-reveals-50395>>

urged its fighters to continue their activities. The ambiguity ended soon as on 8 November 2021, both sides confirmed a month-long ceasefire agreement.¹⁵⁶

Since the first month of 2022, reports once again began to emerge about peace talks with the TTP. A media report in January 2022 claimed that the government had initiated another round of talks, and a local tribal jirga of prominent elders had met with TTP chief Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud in eastern Afghanistan's Paktika province. However, the TTP's central spokesman, Muhammad Khurasani, downplayed the talks but claimed, "the jirga contacted us, but we referred them to the mediator, which is the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. So far, there have been no discussions or meetings with the jirga."¹⁵⁷

Later, the TTP made a ceasefire announcement early in May 2022, which it later extended for an indefinite period. On May 31st, it was announced that the government of Pakistan and the TTP separately met with the Acting Prime Minister of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) and announced an extension of the ceasefire.¹⁵⁸ A few days later, a 50-member Pakistani delegation arrived in Kabul to hold a jirga with the TTP leadership.¹⁵⁹ On June 18, 2022, the Afghan Taliban confirmed that the Pakistani government and the TTP had reached a mutual agreement regarding an 'indefinite ceasefire' during their ongoing negotiations.¹⁶⁰ However, the banned TTP categorically stated it would not back down from its 'primary' demand for the reversal of the merger of ex-FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The claim was made by none other than the TTP chief, Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, in an interview with a YouTuber. The interview made rounds on social media and was apparently conducted somewhere in Kabul, according to *Dawn*.¹⁶¹

In early July 2022, Interior Minister Rana Sanaullah stated that a parliamentary committee had authorized the military leadership to continue talks. However, he asserted that the talks would only be conducted within the framework of the Constitution of Pakistan, and no agreements beyond its scope would be negotiated or agreed upon.¹⁶² In another related development, the Parliamentary Committee on National Security also formally approved the negotiation process and endorsed the formation of a 'Parliamentary Oversight Committee'. The PCNS was also informed that there could be no compromise on the merger of the erstwhile tribal areas, adherence to the Constitution, and the disarmament of the group. These were described as the Pakistan government's 'red lines'.¹⁶³

A delegation of Pakistani religious leaders, led by Mufti Taqi Usmani, visited Kabul on July 25-26 and met with TTP leadership apart from Taliban government officials. The TTP reportedly communicated to the delegation the obstacles encountered during their negotiations with Pakistani authorities and criticized Pakistan for its involvement in the US-led war on terror. They also declared that the country's Constitution and system were not in line with Islamic tradition.

¹⁵⁶ "Pakistan government, banned TTP group reach ceasefire agreement", Al-Jazeera, November 8, 2021,

<<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/8/pakistan-government-banned-group-ttp-reach-ceasefire-agreement>>

¹⁵⁷ Ihsanullah Tipu Mehsud, "Pakistan turns to tribal jirga to restart peace talks with local Taliban," *The Nation*, January 18, 2022, <<https://nation.com.pk/18-Jan-2022/pakistan-turns-to-tribal-jirga-to-restart-peace-talks-with-local-taliban>>

¹⁵⁸ Ismail Khan, "Islamabad, TTP agree on indefinite ceasefire," *Dawn*, May 31, 2022,

<<https://www.dawn.com/news/1692383>>

¹⁵⁹ "پاکستانی طالبان سے مذاکرات کیلئے ۵ رکنی جرگہ کابل پہنچ گیا", *Daily Mashriq* [Urdu], June 2, 2022,

<<https://mashriqtv.pk/story/?story=202206020102>>

¹⁶⁰ Anadolu Agency, "Afghan Taliban confirm Pakistan-TTP 'indefinite ceasefire'," *The Express Tribune*, June 18, 2022,

<<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2362180/afghan-taliban-confirm-pakistan-ttp-indefinite-ceasefire>>

¹⁶¹ Pazir Gul, "TTP refuses to budge from demand for Fata merger reversal," *Dawn*, June 30, 2022.

¹⁶² Iftikhar A. Khan, "Military given go-ahead for TTP talks, Says Sana," *Dawn*, July 3, 2022.

¹⁶³ Baqir Sajjad Syed, "Parliamentary body to keep eye on talks with TTP," *Dawn*, July 6, 2022.

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According to one account, the Pakistani scholars' delegation urged the TTP leadership to withdraw their demand for the reversal of FATA merger, but they refused to budge.¹⁶⁴ Earlier, on July 22, a high-level military huddle chaired by Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee Gen Nadeem Raza also discussed 'peace talks' with the banned TTP and decided to pursue the matter in accordance with a "comprehensive security strategy." "The forum was given a detailed briefing on the review of the national security situation specific to the Western Border, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan," the ISPR said about the meeting.¹⁶⁵

In November 2022, the TTP unilaterally annulled the ceasefire after the government refused to reverse the FATA merger and fulfill other demands set forth by the group. However, the TTP claimed it ended the ceasefire because of continuing military operations against its members and commanders.¹⁶⁶ Pakistan began to bear the cost of reconciliation overtures with the TTP as the group continued to strengthen itself and carried out an increased number of terrorist attacks. Decision-makers eventually realized that the affirmation from the Afghan Taliban was merely a smokescreen that only benefited the TTP in regrouping. For instance, the National Counter-Terrorism Authority (NACTA) revealed that negotiations between Pakistan and the TTP only emboldened the group and allowed it to expand the scale and reach of its activities.¹⁶⁷

Most observers interviewed for this study criticized the government's talks with the TTP on multiple grounds. Some argued that offering amnesty or entertaining the demands of hardcore militant groups like the TTP, who refuse to abandon their extremist ideologies, could pose significant dangers. They contended that by making such concessions, the TTP could potentially reclaim areas it had previously lost, with or without weapons, allowing its members to propagate their radical ideology. Even a slight amount of public support and empowerment could enable the group to reinstate the implementation of its version of Sharia. Additionally, by accommodating a "reconciled TTP" in Pakistan's tribal regions, the Afghan Taliban would garner vocal support within Pakistan. Some further deliberated that the state need not initiate negotiations with a 'defeated phenomenon,' namely the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan.

Others emphasized the secrecy surrounding the talks and the conditions imposed by the TTP. It was revealed that the TTP aimed to gain control of nine districts in KP, comprising about one-third of the province. This indicates that the negotiations with the TTP were primarily centered on a form of 'give and take' rather than leveraging the gains Pakistan and its people had made against the terrorist group since the 2014 military operation.

¹⁶⁴ *The Express Tribune*, July 27, 2022, <<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2367953/pakistani-clerics-fail-to-soften-ttp-in-kabul-meetings>>

¹⁶⁵ *Dawn*, July 23, 2022, <<https://www.dawn.com/news/1701083>>

¹⁶⁶ "TTP terminates ceasefire agreement with government", *Pakistan Today*, November 28, 2022, <<https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2022/11/28/ttp-terminates-ceasefire-agreement-with-government>>

¹⁶⁷ "NACTA blames talk", *The Nation*, December 10, 2022, <<https://www.nation.com.pk/10-Dec-2022/nacta-blames-talks>>

B. Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K)

Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) is a local chapter of IS or Daesh.¹⁶⁸ Primarily based in Afghanistan, IS-K is Sunni terrorist organization with transnational aims, and like its parent group adheres to an extreme Salafi jihadist interpretation of Islam.

During initial years, IS-K focused on territorial expansion within Afghanistan. After suffering significant losses on the hands of foreign and Afghan forces, the group shifted its strategy to urban warfare in 2019, which followed increased attacks by the group in Afghanistan and parts of Pakistan in subsequent years. This surge was again curtailed by the Taliban raids on IS-K hideouts in urban areas mainly in 2023.

A decrease in frequency of attacks notwithstanding, IS-K has resorted to high impact attacks in recent years including in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan. For instance, the group targeted an election rally in Pakistan's Bajaur district on July 30, 2023, killing over 60 and wounding well over 100 people; IS-K also claimed three attacks in February 2024 in Balochistan province targeting political leaders, which claimed 33 lives and injured 54 others. Similarly, on January 3, 2024, the group carried out a double suicide bombing in Iran that killed 91 people and wounded at least 102 others during a ceremony outside the tomb of Major General Qassem Soleimani.

IS-K has intensified efforts to destabilize the Taliban government by targeting foreigners and conducting attacks on civilians and Shia minorities. This aims to undermine the Taliban's claim of restoring peace and stability. Since December 2022, IS-K has killed several senior Taliban officials, including a suicide attack at the funeral of Deputy Governor Nisar Ahmad Ahmadi. The Taliban's counter-terrorism measures against IS-K have yielded mixed results, often resorting to extreme tactics with little concern for civilian casualties.¹⁶⁹

• Background on IS footprints in Pakistan and Afghanistan

In the last quarter of 2014, signs of Islamic State (IS) presence emerged in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Graffiti supporting IS appeared in several Pakistani cities, including Peshawar, Rawalpindi, Lahore, Karachi, and Bannu. Pamphlets distributed by IS sympathizers were reported in Peshawar and tribal areas bordering Afghanistan. Additionally, a report from the Balochistan government highlighted increasing IS recruitment in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces.¹⁷⁰

Towards the end of 2014, several Pakistani militant groups, including Jundullah, the Karachi-based Tehreek-e-Khilafat movement, and splintering commanders¹⁷¹ and factions of the TTP, either expressed support for or pledged allegiance to the Islamic State group. Jamaatul Ahrar (JA), a TTP splinter group who has recently re-joined the group, voiced support for IS but stopped short of

¹⁶⁸ IS-K sees Khorasan as a historical region encompassing parts of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan Iran and Bangladesh.

¹⁶⁹ For details, see: <https://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/what-australia-is-doing/terrorist-organisations/listed-terrorist-organisations/islamic-state-khorasan-province>

¹⁷⁰ "IS footprints growing in Pakistan," *Dawn*, November 9, 2014, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1143272>.

¹⁷¹ Most of these and other Pakistani Taliban leaders pledging allegiance to the ISIS later left for Afghanistan due to military operations in erstwhile FATA, where at least three of them were reportedly killed (Shahidullah Shahid, Hafez Saeed and Gul Zaman) in drone strikes in eastern Nangarhar.

declaring allegiance. Additionally, members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), previously associated with the TTP in Pakistan, announced their collaboration with IS in 2014.¹⁷²

What inspired these groups, among other factors, was IS's ability to establish control over territories—a feat that Al-Qaeda, despite its significant influence among Islamist militants worldwide, had not achieved.

Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, an IS spokesman, announced the formation of a shura (council) for 'Khorasan' in January 2015, encompassing Pakistan, Afghanistan, and parts of Central Asia.¹⁷³ Hafez Saeed Khan, a former leader of the TTP from Pakistan's Orakzai region, was appointed as its head, with Mullah Abdul Rauf Khadim, a former Afghan Taliban leader, as his deputy. Mullah Rauf was reportedly killed in a US drone strike in Afghanistan on February 9, 2015. Hafiz Saeed was also reportedly killed in an airstrike in Nangarhar province, Afghanistan, although the group denied his death.

Since 2014, numerous Pakistani and Afghan Taliban militants and groups have operated under the banner of the Islamic State or pledged allegiance to it in various parts of Afghanistan. Pakistani Taliban commanders, aligning with IS and others, were relocated to Afghanistan due to extensive military operations in Pakistan's ex-FATA region, Karachi, and parts of Balochistan. Initially, IS supporters and members engaged in violent clashes with the Afghan Taliban and skirmishes with Afghan security forces. From April 2015 onwards, Afghan media reported numerous clashes between the Afghan Taliban and IS affiliates across Afghanistan, particularly intensifying in May and June of that year. Farah, Nangarhar (starting in the Kot district and spreading to Chaparhar, Spinghar, Batikot, Khogyani, Pachir Agam), Kunar, Helmand, and other northern provinces became arenas of conflict between the two groups. Nangarhar, in particular, saw significant clashes, exacerbated after IS beheaded 10 Taliban members in the province on June 3, 2015.¹⁷⁴

In the beginning, it was a former Guantanamo Bay detainee Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost and his aid Maulvi Abdul Qahar, who declared allegiance to the IS in Afghanistan in September 2014 and started campaigning in support of the group in parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan. They were also backed by some Taliban commanders in eastern Afghan provinces of Nuristan and Kunar, bordering Pakistan.

Later, the IS-inspired militants started to extend their influence towards southern Afghanistan mainly Loya Paktia, Ghazni and Helmand. Mullah Rauf first raised the IS flag in Helmand that is considered the stronghold of the Taliban insurgents and reportedly started recruiting for the IS, though he was killed one month later in a US drone strike.

Despite the Islamic State's growing inspiration and influence in the eastern and the southern provinces of Afghanistan in 2014-2015, the Afghan National Directorate of Security continuously denied the emerging threat and "denounced the IS as the Haqqani or the Taliban militants."¹⁷⁵ That was partly true as well, because those raising the IS flags were either local Afghan Taliban factions or foreign militants of Pakistani and Central Asian origin, but it did not make the threat less grave.

¹⁷² The group also moved to Afghanistan after the launch of North Waziristan operation in FATA and is currently operating in northern parts of Afghanistan.

¹⁷³ *The Diplomat*, January 29, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/01/meet-the-khorasan-shura-the-islamic-states-leaders-for-south-asia>.

¹⁷⁴ Muhammad Hassan Khetab, "Taliban-IS clashes may accelerate peace process," Pajhwok, Afghanistan, June 6, 2015.

¹⁷⁵ Khaama Press, Afghanistan, February 26, 2015, <http://www.khaama.com/clash-between-radicals-isil-vs-taliban-in-afghanistan-9341>.

- **Brief history and development of IS-K**

As cited earlier, IS-K was formed in January 2015 to extend IS's self-proclaimed caliphate into parts of South and Central Asia. Like the splintering commanders of the TTP and other groups mentioned earlier, some Lashkar-e-Jhangvi¹⁷⁶ and other militants from Balochistan also joined IS-K and traveled to Afghanistan to support it. Indeed, the Balochistan chapter of the violent Sunni sectarian group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi had been associated with the IS since the latter's inception. The LeJ militants who travelled to Syria to fight against Bashar al-Assad's forces joined the IS. In 2013, LeJ militants established the Ghazi Abdul Rasheed¹⁷⁷ training camp in the Iraqi city of Erbil. The militants trained in this camp later formed the Ghazi Force.¹⁷⁸

The rapid rise in the appeal of the IS and its local chapters can be attributed to the increasing trend of 'Salafization' and a desire among disillusioned militants to align with a more radical and 'pure' global Islamist movement.¹⁷⁹ These transformations, common among terrorist groups, often involve a process of abrasion, sometimes profound, but should not be viewed as undermining the groups undergoing change. Instead, these transformations provide them with new ideological vigor, enabling them to restructure and refine their operational strategies. For instance, when a breakaway faction of the TTP, Jamaatul Ahrar, asserted ownership over the TTP, it essentially replaced older organizational and operational structures with new ones. This evolution is not unique to the TTP; Pakistani terrorist movements have undergone various transformations over the past decades. For example, the September 11th, 2001, terrorist attacks in the US enhanced Al-Qaeda's influence among Kashmir-based militant and sectarian groups in Pakistan, leading to significant transformations within them.¹⁸⁰

Initially focused on Afghanistan and Pakistan, the IS-K expanded into Bangladesh in 2016. After the IS suffered territorial losses in Syria and Iraq in May 2019, IS-K underwent significant organizational restructuring. This involved the creation of distinct provinces for India and Pakistan, with IS-K designated as an Afghan entity, extending into parts of north-western Pakistan. While maintaining autonomy in decision-making, IS-K has maintained strong communication with the leadership in the Levant. Recent leadership changes have seen IS-K defer to the Levant-based leadership, with the current leader, Dr. Shahab al-Muhajir, appointed through an official letter from the Levant-based leadership, departing from the previous selection process by IS-K's own consultative council.¹⁸¹

- **Strength and strongholds**

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan has led to a strengthening of IS-K's membership and influence in the country. Before the Taliban takeover of Kabul in August 2021, estimates suggested there were between 500 to 1,500 IS-K fighters in Afghanistan. However, since the Taliban assumed

¹⁷⁶A violent Sunni sectarian group that is reportedly involved in the killing of Shias, including Hazaras in Balochistan. Factions of the group are believed to be associated with al-Qaeda and the TTP.

¹⁷⁷ Militants named the camp after Rasheed Ghazi, who was a Sunni cleric killed during the siege of the Red Mosque in Islamabad in 2007.

¹⁷⁸ Muhammad Amir Rana, "ISIS's cascading effect," *Dawn*, July 13, 2014, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1118838>

¹⁷⁹ Abdul Sayed and Tore Refslund Hamming, "The growing threat of the Islamic State in Afghanistan and South Asia," USIP Special Report, June 7, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/06/growing-threat-islamic-state-afghanistan-and-south-asia>

¹⁸⁰ Muhammad Amir Rana, "ISIS's cascading effect," *Dawn*, July 13, 2014, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1118838>

¹⁸¹ Abdul Sayed and Tore Refslund Hamming, "The growing threat of the Islamic State in Afghanistan and South Asia," USIP Special Report, June 7.

control, the number of IS-K militants is believed to have doubled, with many members reportedly released from Bagram Air Base and Pul-e-Charki prisons by the Taliban regime. According to updated UN figures from early 2022, the number of IS-K fighters had risen to nearly 4,000, up from earlier estimates of 2,200, following the release of several thousand prisoners.¹⁸²

A US State Department report early 2023 identified IS-K as a critical group, which poses a significant threat to Afghanistan and Pakistan. According to the report, IS-K is estimated to have between 3,000 and 5,000 fighters, most of which are based in Afghanistan.¹⁸³

Other sources estimate the number of IS-K fighters to be around 4,000 to 6,000, comprising Afghans and nationals from Azerbaijan, Iran, Pakistan, the Russian Federation, Turkey, Central Asian countries, and a small contingent of Arab fighters who migrated from the Syrian Arab Republic to Afghanistan in recent years.¹⁸⁴

Initially, IS-K training camps and strongholds were concentrated in Afghanistan's north, northeast, and east, with the construction of at least five new camps in 2022. The group has also established a network of sleeper cells in central Afghanistan, while operating in smaller cells of 5 to 15 individuals elsewhere. According to a UN Security Council report from February 2023, core IS-K cells are primarily located in the eastern provinces of Kunar, Nangarhar, and Nuristan, with a significant presence in Kabul and surrounding areas.¹⁸⁵

In Pakistan, IS-K is mainly present and active in Bajaur, Mohmand and Peshawar districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Mastung, Kalat and Quetta districts of Balochistan, and Karachi in Sindh.

- **Goals and objectives**

IS-K aims to destabilize and overthrow existing governments in the historic Khorasan region, intending to establish a caliphate across South and Central Asia. They seek to govern under a strict interpretation of Islamic Sharia law, with aspirations to expand beyond the region.

Sayed and Hamming divide the evolution of IS-K's goals and objectives into two phases marked by distinct military strategies: initially, from 2015 to late 2019, a focus on territorial expansion and consolidation (*tamkeen*), followed by a shift to urban warfare strategy in summer 2020. After the Taliban's takeover in August 2021, IS-K adopted a new strategy of 'destabilization', including urban warfare tactics. Initially, IS-K aimed to establish its version of Sharia law by seizing and governing territories in eastern, north-eastern, and northern Afghanistan, attracting supporters from various regions. However, sustaining territorial control proved challenging due to resource limitations and intense military pressure from Afghan and US forces, leading to its eventual collapse by 2019. Subsequently, IS-K shifted its focus to urban warfare, targeting enemies like the Taliban to undermine their legitimacy among the local population. This strategy shift, led by al-Muhajir,

¹⁸² United Nations Security Council's twenty-ninth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, February 3, 2022.

¹⁸³ Anwar Iqbal, "'TTP wants to push govt out of KP to establish Sharia'," *Dawn*, March 1, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1739661/ttp-wants-to-push-govt-out-of-kp-to-establish-sharia>

¹⁸⁴ The fourteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team of the UNSC, which can be seen here: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4012868?ln=en&v=pdf>

¹⁸⁵ 31st report of UNSC Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team that was released in February 2023: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4002636?ln=en#record-files-collapse-header>

resulted in a series of attacks aimed at demonstrating vulnerability and eroding support for rival groups.¹⁸⁶

Jadoon, in describing IS-K's post-Taliban phase of destabilization (*tawwahu*), highlights the group's aim to establish control through politico-military operations that challenge the Taliban's claimed monopoly on violence in Afghanistan. These operations often employ multiple strategic logics, ultimately aiming to portray the Taliban as a weak and ineffective governing entity.¹⁸⁷

- **Organizational and command structure**

Sanaullah Ghafari, also known as Shahab al-Muhajir, is seen as the most ambitious leader of the group. Under his leadership, there has been a notable increase in Afghan nationals within the affiliate, leading to a greater emphasis on Afghanistan and local recruitment efforts. Ghafari, whose reported death is still in question, set himself apart from previous IS-K leaders through his educational and recruitment strategies, attracting more educated individuals and broadening recruitment beyond Salafist circles. Tasked by IS-K leadership to reinvigorate the group, Ghafari received support from Maulawi Rajab.¹⁸⁸ The IS-K's organizational structure is no more hierarchical but entails a network-based system, aimed at enhancing its resilience against attacks and advancing a five-year plan with both short-term and long-term objectives.

In a strategic move to focus IS-K Province solely on Afghanistan and draw in Pakistani militant outfits, especially those linked with the TTP, LeJ, and other Pakistani Jihadi groups focusing on India-administered Kashmir, the IS leadership formally introduced the Islamic State Province of Pakistan (ISPP) in May 2019. This marked a distinct administrative separation of Pakistan from IS-K. In 2021, however, almost the entire KP province, previously under the ISPP's jurisdiction, was integrated into IS-K's organizational network following directives from IS Central.¹⁸⁹

- **Key leaders**

Sanaullah Ghaffari alias Shahab al-Muhajir¹⁹⁰, emir (There were reports of his death, which haven't been confirmed yet)

Abu Fateh Khurasani, Top ideologue¹⁹¹

Sultan Azim Azam, Spokesperson¹⁹²

¹⁸⁶ Abdul Sayed and Tore Refslund Hamming, "The growing threat of the Islamic State in Afghanistan and South Asia," USIP Special Report, June 7, 2023.

¹⁸⁷ Amira Jadoon, et al., "The enduring duel: Islamic State Khorasan's survival under Afghanistan's new rulers," CTC Sentinel, August 2023, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-enduring-duel-islamic-state-khorasans-survival-under-afghanistans-new-rulers/>

¹⁸⁸ The fourteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team of the UNSC, which can be seen here: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4012868?ln=en&v=pdf>

¹⁸⁹ Zia Ur Rehman, "Inside Balochistan's sectarian shift - the rise of IS from Lashkar-i-Jhangvi," *Dawn*, October 3, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1778910/inside-balochistans-sectarian-shift-the-rise-of-is-from-lashkar-i-jhangvi>

¹⁹⁰ "Sanaullah Ghafari, IS operative in Washington's sights," *France 24*, February 10, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220210-sanaullah-ghafari-is-operative-in-washington-s-sights>

¹⁹¹ <https://twitter.com/Khurasandiary/status/1663834112816214016>

¹⁹² <https://twitter.com/Natsecjeff/status/1670193010850795521>



Figure 3: IS-K leaders and commanders killed in Afghanistan¹⁹³

- **Operations, targets and tactics**

Although its strength has declined since its zenith in 2018, IS-K continues to plan and conduct attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In Afghanistan, IS-K fighters have persistently carried out remote explosive and suicide bomb attacks targeting civilian, security, and militant forces, although the frequency of such attacks has recently decreased. For instance, IS-K claimed responsibility for an explosion during Eid al-Fitr at a mosque on the outskirts of Kabul on May 14, 2021, resulting in the deaths of 12 civilians and injuring at least 20. On August 26, 2021, an ISIS-K suicide bomber attacked Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, killing over 170 people, including 28 Taliban members and 13 US military personnel. Most recently, IS-K claimed responsibility for a suicide attack in Afghanistan's Kandahar city on March 21, 2024, killing at least 21 people, including members of the Taliban.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹³ https://x.com/SATimes_TV/status/1725891249079804255?s=20

¹⁹⁴ Relief Web, "ACLED Regional Overview Asia-Pacific: March 2024, April 8, 2024, https://acleddata.com/2024/04/08/regional-overview-asia-pacific-march-2024/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=regional-overview-asia-pacific-march-2024

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On September 6, 2022, a report by the Human Rights Watch claimed that since the Taliban took over Afghanistan, the IS-K has claimed responsibility for 13 attacks against Hazaras and has been linked to at least 3 more, killing and injuring at least 700 people.¹⁹⁵

IS-K also engages in armed clashes with security forces, the Taliban, and other militant groups, though these became less frequent following IS-K defeats and loss of territory in 2018.

Like other Salafi-jihadist groups, IS-K has celebrated violent attacks against the West, but its operations have mainly remained local. Since 2017, the majority of attacks have taken place in Kabul, the eastern provinces of Nangarhar and Kunar, and in and around the northern province of Jowzjan. In Kabul, the targets have primarily been civilians and security forces, while in Jowzjan, clashes with Taliban forces have been predominant. IS-K's activities in Nangarhar and Kunar, which constitute the group's historical base, have been characterized by a higher frequency and diversity of attacks, targeting civilians, security forces, the Taliban, and other militant groups.¹⁹⁶

In Pakistan, too, the group has conducted 53 attacks since the Taliban took power in Afghanistan in August 2021 (until March 10th, 2024). These attacks claimed 294 lives and wounded 515 others. In these attacks, the IS-K and its Pakistani chapter, called as ISPP, hit a diverse range of targets, which are given at the table below:

Table 8: Targets hit by IS-K in Pakistan since August 2021 till March 10, 2024

Targets	No. of attacks	Killed	Injured
Security/law enforcement agencies (personnel, convoys, posts)	18	33	42
Tribal elders	1	1	0
Civilians	3	3	2
Shia religious scholars/community	1	65	186
Worship places/shrines/madrassas	1	64	66
Sunni religious leaders/community	4	4	0
Haqqani Network	1	1	0
Political leaders/workers	14	112	215
Hindu community	1	1	1
Christian community/Church	2	2	3
Sikh community	4	5	0
Alleged spy or collaborator	1	2	0
Health/polio workers, security escorts	1	1	0
Pro-govt tribesmen/peace committee members	1	0	0
Total	53	294	515

IS-K has increasingly become a significant threat to Pakistan's security in recent years. In 2023, following the TTP, the attacks orchestrated by IS-K resulted in the second-highest number of

¹⁹⁵ Details can be seen here: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/09/06/afghanistan-isis-group-targets-religious-minorities>

¹⁹⁶ Catrina Doxsee, et al., "Examining extremism: Islamic State Khurasan Province (ISKP)," CSIS, September 8, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-islamic-state-Khurasan-province-iskp>

terrorism-related casualties in Pakistan. The group maintained active operations in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan provinces throughout the year.

In 2023, the group perpetrated a total of 17 terrorist attacks in Pakistan including three major suicide bombings including one each in Bolan (martyring 9 Balochistan Constabulary officials and one civilian), Bajaur (martyring 64 civilians in a JUI-F political gathering), and Mastung (martyring over 63 people in a 12th Rabiul Awwal (the birthday of the holy prophet (PBUH) procession).

- **Recruitment and training**

The primary support base of IS-K consists of Salafis in the region. The group appeals to Salafi youth to join its cause, framing it as a war against the Afghan Taliban and seeking retribution for the religious constraints imposed on Salafists following the Taliban's capture of power.¹⁹⁷

However, IS-K members in Afghanistan hail from diverse origins, spanning the Middle East, Central Asia, Pakistan, India, Kashmir, China, and beyond; approximately half of the IS-K fighters in Afghanistan are foreigners.¹⁹⁸ The group is purportedly active in recruiting individuals described as "educated and highly radicalized adherents of Salafism" from countries including Pakistan, Indonesia, Bangladesh, the Maldives, as well as former Afghan militant groups' members such as the Ikhwan militia.¹⁹⁹

In recent years, the group has also placed focus on recruiting TTP fighters from Pashtun tribes in KP province and anti-Shia militants such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and its global arm in Pakistan. Following territorial losses in Afghanistan and the Taliban's takeover, IS-K shifted its recruitment focus there also to Taliban foot soldiers. While the effectiveness of this strategy remains uncertain, efforts by the Taliban to reconcile with the Salafist community hint at potential success in IS-K's recruitment among young Salafis.²⁰⁰

IS-K effectively capitalized on the Taliban's animosity towards former Afghan government's law enforcement officials and their 'Pashtunization' policy, attracting Taliban commanders and dissatisfied fighters from ethnic minority groups, as well as released prisoners. The group also put an effort to recruit Uyghurs and ethnic Tajik and Uzbek minorities, leading to reports of factions within the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan secretly pledging allegiance to Da'esh while operating under the Taliban's banner and awaiting opportune moments.²⁰¹ According to another source, the Yuldash faction of the IMU had initially maintained allegiance to the Taliban. However, following restrictions imposed by the Taliban post-2021, its members began defecting to IS-K. This pattern also extends to the Uyghurs of China.²⁰² However, Uzbeks and Uyghurs are present in small numbers in Afghanistan. But defections within groups like the TTP can pose significant challenges for the Afghan Taliban. Certain factions within the TTP, like Jamaatul Ahrar, maintain close ties

¹⁹⁷ Abdul Sayed and Tore Refslund Hamming, "The growing threat of the Islamic State in Afghanistan and South Asia."

¹⁹⁸ Seth G. Jones, "Countering resurgent terrorist threat in Afghanistan," Council on Foreign Relations, April 14, 2022.

¹⁹⁹ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury "View: Can Taliban tame ETIM, checkmate ISIS-K and ensure China's security?" *Economic Times*, September 7, 2021.

²⁰⁰ Abdul Sayed and Tore Refslund Hamming, "The growing threat of the Islamic State in Afghanistan and South Asia."

²⁰¹ The fourteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team of the UN Security Council's 1988 Taliban Sanctions Committee, released in June 2023, can be downloaded here: <https://www.longwarjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/UN-Sanctions-Monitoring-report-Afghanistan-14th.pdf>

²⁰² Antonio Giustozzi, "The Islamic State in Khorasan between Taliban counter-terrorism and resurgence prospects," ICCT, January 30, 2024, <https://www.icct.nl/publication/islamic-state-khorasan-between-taliban-counter-terrorism-and-resurgence-prospects>

with IS-K leadership. This dynamic contributes to the Taliban's reluctance to take action against the TTP and other terrorist organizations within their territory.²⁰³

- **Ideological propagation**

The IS-K employs diverse methods to spread its ideology, including intensified media operations led by figures like Sultan Aziz Azam, and platforms such as Voice of Khurasan and the Al-Azaim Foundation. These efforts span over dozen languages and encompass a network of Telegram channels.

IS-K's main propagation themes include targeting other ethnic and sectarian groups, promoting its takfiri ideology, discrediting the Taliban, and provoking retaliatory actions against the West, etc.

Jadoon characterizes the latest, or third, wave of IS-K media outreach and operations as a significant shift towards a regional approach, especially within the context of a Taliban-led Afghanistan. This shift is evident in the diverse array of languages now used in IS-K's propaganda, which includes not only Arabic, Pashto, and Dari but also Urdu, Hindi, Malayalam, Bengali, Uzbek, Tajik, Russian, Farsi, and English.²⁰⁴ In September 2022, Tawhid News, a pro-IS-K Uzbek-language outlet, announced the expansion of IS-K's jihad into Central Asia, with a focus on targeting Chinese investments and infrastructure. Additionally, unofficial IS-affiliated channels such as Nida-e Haqq, Al-Qitaal, and Al-Burhan consistently disseminate materials in South Asian languages.²⁰⁵

The "Voice of Khurasan" also disseminates propaganda in multiple languages, including Pashto, Persian, Tajik, Uzbek, and Russian. Its expansion into Tajik and Uzbek languages was facilitated by Rashidov, an Uzbek national who joined IS-K's media wing. Rashidov was recruited online while working as a labor migrant in Finland before relocating to Afghanistan. IS-K drew on the teachings of radical ideologist Abu Mohammad Qosoni (Khodjihonov) based in Syria.²⁰⁶

ISK's unofficial channels are independently run by IS-K supporters or affiliates, operating through local language media outlets. However, ISK's primary official media outlet is the "Al-Azaim Foundation," known for its publication of long-form narratives, books, and magazines, as well as videos covering a wide range of topics from Sharia law and religious matters to social and political issues.²⁰⁷

- **Geographical spread/influence**

IS-K's primary territorial focus remains on Afghanistan and Pakistan. Beyond these two countries, the Islamic State also maintains operations in India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka through its designated chapters. However, in these regions, it encounters challenges in

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Amira Jadoon, et al., "The enduring duel: Islamic State Khorasan's survival under Afghanistan's new rulers," CTC Sentinel, August 2023, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-enduring-duel-islamic-state-khorasans-survival-under-afghanistans-new-rulers/>

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ 31st report of UNSC Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team that was released in February 2023: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4002636?ln=en#record-files-collapse-header>

²⁰⁷ Amira Jadoon, et al., "The enduring duel: Islamic State Khorasan's survival under Afghanistan's new rulers," CTC Sentinel, August 2023.

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sustaining relevance, primarily due to competition with other militant groups and effective counterterrorism measures.²⁰⁸

As cited earlier, the group has conducted 53 terrorist attacks in Pakistan between August 2021 and March 2024, which were spread over 13 districts as listed in the table below:

Table 9: Geographical spread of IS-K attacks in Pakistan (August 1, 2021-March 10, 2024)

District	Attacks	Killed	Injured	Damages\ Target
Bajaur	20	85	149	Civilians, political leaders/workers, tribal elders, security/law enforcement agencies, Sunni religious leaders/community
Khyber	1	1	0	Sunni religious leaders/community
Orakzai	1	3	0	Security/law enforcement agencies (personnel, convoys, posts)
Peshawar	14	77	192	Christian community/Church, security/law enforcement agencies, Shia religious scholars/community, Sikh community, Sunni religious leaders/community
South Waziristan	2	2	0	Haqqani Network, Security/law enforcement agencies
Tank	1	2	0	Security/law enforcement agencies
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Total	39	170	341	
Bolan	1	11	11	Security/law enforcement agencies
Kalat	2	3	1	Alleged spy or collaborator, Hindu community
Mastung	6	67	83	Christian community/Church, health/polio workers, security escorts, political leaders/workers, security/law enforcement agencies, worship places/shrines/madrassas
Pishin	1	20	29	Political leaders/workers
Qilla Abdullah	1	0	0	Political leaders/workers
Qilla Saifullah	1	13	25	Political leaders/workers
Sibi	2	10	25	Political leaders/workers, security/law enforcement agencies
Balochistan Total	14	124	174	
Total in Pakistan	53	294	515	

Until 2021, IS-K operated mainly in Nangarhar province and Kabul in Afghanistan, concentrating its attacks there.²⁰⁹ However, from 2022, IS-K expanded into northern Afghanistan and Pakistan's

²⁰⁸ Abdul Sayed and Tore Refslund Hamming, "The growing threat of the Islamic State in Afghanistan and South Asia."

²⁰⁹ All of ISK's 83 attacks in 2020 and two-thirds of its 334 attacks in 2021 occurred in these two areas.

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Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, significantly increasing attacks in Kabul, Pakistan's KP province, and northern Afghanistan.²¹⁰ This expansion marks a notable development, allowing IS-K to establish a presence in areas of limited influence. It enables recruitment and support from local communities opposed to the Taliban and strategically positions IS-K along key cross-border routes. While operations in northern Afghanistan are only recent, increased insurgency there could have significant implications for Afghanistan and neighboring Central Asian nations.²¹¹

• **Group affiliations/nexuses**

Amira Jadoon in one of her reports has provided the following alliances of IS-K in Pakistan and Afghanistan between January 2014 and December 2017.²¹²

Ideological cooperation: the groups that made public allegiance to the IS-K

- Orakzai faction (TTP)
- Bajaur faction (TTP)
- Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
- Jundullah
- Ansar al-Mujahideen
- Ansar ul Khilafat Wal Jihad

Logistical cooperation: the groups sharing resources with IS-K

- Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
- Jundullah
- Ansar ul Khilafat Wal Jihad
- Sipah-e-Sahaba/Ahle Sunnat Wal Jammāt
- Lashkar-e-Islam
- Lashkar-e-Jhangvi Al-Alami

Operational cooperation or joints attacks with IS-K

- Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
- Jundullah
- Lashkar-e-Islam
- Lashkar-e-Jhangvi Al-Alami
- Jamaat-ul-Ahrar
- Baloch Nationalist Army (the group is no more active or functional)

• **Financial sources**

The IS-K has been receiving support including in financial terms from the Islamic State's core leadership in Iraq and Syria. Territorial losses in Syria and Iraq had also increased the group's focus on Afghanistan from where it continued to improve its networks in the region.

²¹⁰ About 27 percent of IS-K's 217 attacks in 2022 occurred in Kabul, 22 percent in Pakistan's KP province, and 15 percent in northern Afghanistan.

²¹¹ Amira Jadoon, et al., "The enduring duel: Islamic State Khorasan's survival under Afghanistan's new rulers," CTC Sentinel, August 2023.

²¹² "Amira Jadoon, "Allied and lethal: Islamic State Khurasan's network and organizational capacity in Afghanistan and Pakistan," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, December 2018, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Allied-Lethal.pdf>

Additionally, the group has been receiving financial support from Muslim foundations, non-governmental organizations, and families of ISIL (Da'esh) members. There are also occurrences of secure cryptocurrency transactions being used for funding. Apart from external sources, ISK also generates funds internally through activities such as drug trafficking, levying taxes on drug transportation, kidnapping for ransom, mineral smuggling, and extorting local populations, trade, and transportation companies. In the latter scenario, the group frequently operates under the guise of the Taliban, aiming to enrich itself while undermining the legitimacy of the current Afghan authorities.

A 2023 UNSC report cited the Al-Karrar office of ISIL in Somalia as a key financial hub funneling funds to affiliates like IS-K. Reports suggest that the Al-Karrar office supports IS-K with a monthly cryptocurrency transfer of \$25,000. ISIL Somalia itself earns around \$100,000 monthly through extortion of the shipping industry and illegal taxation. However, precise details regarding the origin of funds directed to the Al-Karrar office remain elusive.²¹³

In Afghanistan, since Balkh is one of the most economically developed provinces in the north, it has remained of primary interest to IS-K in terms of revenue generation. Some observers hold that IS-K has started smuggling narcotics, which is a new development.²¹⁴

According to some accounts, funding for IS-K began to decline in 2018 due to the diminishing resources of its parent organization, IS Central. This decline continued with fluctuations until 2023, when funding for IS-K nearly ceased altogether. Apart from dwindling support from IS Central, IS-K faced additional challenges, including a crackdown by Turkish authorities on all IS branches, including IS-K, which had a significant financial hub in Turkey. This crackdown led to the detention of numerous IS-K members and disrupted their operations. Additionally, the Taliban intensified monitoring of financial flows, warning Afghan hawala traders against transferring funds to IS-K. Consequently, by the first half of 2023, IS-K was unable to pay salaries and provide logistics to its operatives in Afghanistan.²¹⁵

Despite facing challenges from the Turkish crackdown and diminishing support from IS Central, IS-K managed to adapt by relocating its financial operations and attempting to diversify its revenue sources, although with limited success. Tightened monitoring by the Taliban on informal banking was countered by conducting multiple small transfers instead of large sums. While funding remained low compared to previous years, a complete financial shutdown was averted. Despite the financial crisis, IS-K leadership remained active, restructuring the organization and transitioning to a fully underground system, anticipating a lack of control over significant territories in the future. Mobile bases, training camps, and small cells have become the new norm within IS-K's structure in Afghanistan.²¹⁶

- **Ideology**

Following the Salafi interpretation of Islam, IS-K operates as a province of the Islamic State, with Khurasan denoting the historical region spanning Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Iran. IS-K adheres to the overarching ideology of the Islamic State

²¹³ 31st report of UNSC Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team that was released in February 2023: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4002636?ln=en#record-files-collapse-header>

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Antonio Giustozzi, "The Islamic State in Khorasan between Taliban counter-terrorism and resurgence prospects," ICCT, January 30, 2024.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

group, aiming to establish a global caliphate governed by Islamic law. The Islamic State's slogan, "baqiya wa tatamaddad" (remaining and expanding), urges Muslims to immigrate to its emerging caliphate. However, this caliphate must embody a "pure Islamic State," necessitating strict adherence to the Prophet's traditions. In 2016, the Islamic State issued a document titled "Aqidah wa Manhaj al-Dawlah al-Islamiah fi al-Takfir" (Islamic State Creed and Methodology of Takfir), declaring that those who reject Sharia law are considered apostates (kafir) and subject to execution.²¹⁷

The Islamic State (IS) emerged as a separate entity from Al-Qaeda, branching off ideologically, particularly in its endorsement of violence against Shia civilians. While both groups advocate for violent confrontation with the "far enemy" (the West), IS also targets the "near enemy" (regional apostates). It conducts a global offensive jihad to expel foreign nonbelievers and apostates from its territories and sanctions violence against locals who oppose its Sharia adherence. For instance, IS-K has targeted Afghanistan's Hazara Shia minority.

Former Taliban members disillusioned by negotiations in Afghanistan were initially drawn to IS-K's uncompromising stance against the West. IS-K condemned the Taliban's peace talks with the US in March 2020, viewing them as collaborating with "crusaders." In 2021, IS-K propaganda promised retribution against the Taliban for their US peace deal. Additionally, IS-K upholds the concept of tawhid al-hakimiyyah (unity of governance), rejecting Muslim leaders who do not implement full Sharia law. It refuses to recognize the Taliban as legitimate Islamic leaders, criticizing them as "filthy nationalists" for prioritizing narrow ethnic and nationalistic interests over universal Islamic jihad.²¹⁸

- **Political views**

The fundamental political narrative of IS-K, disseminated across multiple media channels, revolves around the promotion of international jihad in the 'Khurasan Province', encompassing the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. It aims to establish the Islamic State as the legitimate leader of a global Muslim community (ummah), wherein all adherents pledge allegiance to al-Baghdadi as the caliph. Central to the Islamic State's vision of a caliphate is the acquisition of physical territories, or wilayas, with Khurasan being hailed as the "sacred battlefield." Propaganda from the Khurasan branch remains aligned with the Islamic State's takfiri doctrine, advocating for assaults not only on other religious sects like Shia and Sufis but also on Sunni factions deviating from the group's ideology such as Deobandis and Salafis aligned with the Taliban. Nationalist movements are portrayed as opposition to the caliphate; the Taliban are derogatorily labelled as "impure nationalists," while Kashmiri militant groups are depicted as mere "proxies of Pakistan." Various IS-K propaganda materials express animosity towards Pakistan, branding it as an apostate state, and incite followers to target the Pakistani Army.²¹⁹

IS-K contends that Pakistan has strayed from its Islamic essence due to its allowance of elections, political parties, and man-made laws, which it defines as a system initially introduced by Muhammad Ali Jinnah under British influence, while simultaneously fostering nationalism. In a video, various images depict prominent Pakistani politicians, including President Musharraf and Prime Ministers Raza Gilani, Nawaz Sharif, and Imran Khan, engaging in handshakes and

²¹⁷ Catrina Doxsee, et al., "Examining extremism: Islamic State Khurasan Province (ISKP)," CSIS, September 8, 2021.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Amira Jadoon, et al., "Challenging the ISK brand in Afghanistan-Pakistan: Rivalries and divided loyalties," CTC Sentinel, Volume 11, Issue 4, April 2018.

embraces with esteemed world leaders such as Emmanuel Macron and the last four successive US Presidents, King Muhammad Bin Salman of Saudi Arabia, President Xi Jinping of China, and UK Prime Minister David Cameron. Additionally, the video features a clip of Pakistan and Russia's Foreign Ministers, Qureshi and Lavrov, signing a joint statement.²²⁰

Moreover, IS-K has a long history of criticizing Pakistan's religious-political parties such as Jamaat-e-Islami and Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam (JUI) for their support to and participation in the parliamentary democracy. Overall, the group has not only targeted political leaders but has also been propagating against participating in democratic or electoral processes.

For one, on July 30, 2023, IS-K executed a deadly suicide attack on a JUI-F's political convention in Bajaur district of KP, resulting in 65 fatalities and 127 injuries. Following the bombing, IS-K released a 92-page propaganda booklet condemning the JUI-F and outlining its intent to target religious political parties in Pakistan. IS-K explicitly warned against participation in elections and democracy, inviting support from religious figures and followers. The pamphlet concludes with derision towards militant groups, notably Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), who denounced the attack, and a cautionary message to scholars and religious political parties in Pakistan. Later, in August of that year, IS-K published a 27-page pamphlet titled "The apostasy of the electoral process," justifying attacks during general elections in Pakistan. The group carried few major attacks against election candidates and their rallies in Balochistan a day before the elections were held on February 8, 2024.

- **State responses**

Since 2014, with the advent of IS-K in Pakistan, the Pakistani state's countering strategy has remained a kinetic one, with larger emphasis on the use of force and intelligence-based operations against the group. Pakistan has been able to bust active cells of IS-K in Karachi, Lahore, Peshawar, Islamabad, and Sialkot, among other cities. The civil-military cooperation has remained crucial in this connection and provincial counterterrorism departments (CTDs) of police have played a lead role alongside an active role of Intelligence Bureau (IB).²²¹

Similarly, the Taliban regime in Afghanistan is actively pursuing a kinetic operational approach against the IS-K. The Taliban's counter-terrorism efforts primarily involve repression and financial measures. Despite successful reconciliation attempts in some areas, the Taliban show no inclination towards local deals or integrating the Salafi community, a significant IS-K support base. Additionally, the Taliban's counterterrorism and counter-insurgency efforts are hindered by limited resources, particularly advanced equipment. They acknowledge the potential benefits of technology, particularly airlift capabilities and drones for mountain operations. With the possibility of diplomatic recognition from China and other regional countries, the Taliban's access to military supplies may improve in the near future.²²²

²²⁰ Riccardo Valle, "Islamic State Khurasan Province releases first video of 2022: 'O lions of the tribes!'," *Militant Wire*, January 13, 2022, <https://www.militantwire.com/p/islamic-state-khurasan-province-releases>

²²¹ Dr Farhan Zahid, "Dealing with TTP and IS-K after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan: challenges, prospects and policy options for Pakistan," *Pak Institute for Peace Studies*, January 12, 2023, <https://www.pakpips.com/article/7521>

²²² Antonio Giustozzi, "The Islamic State in Khorasan between Taliban counter-terrorism and resurgence prospects," *ICCT*, January 30, 2024.

- **Potential threat to the region and West**

Since 2014, IS-K has emerged as one of the Islamic State's most successful affiliates in establishing an international network. It ranks second only to the parent organization in terms of threats to U.S., Western, and allied interests. IS-K has been involved in numerous attack plots, including cross-border attacks in the region and international plots such as targeting U.S. and NATO bases in Germany. By February 2023, U.S. intelligence had identified 15 IS-K-linked external attack plots, including plans to target embassies, churches, business centers, and the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar. IS-K adopts a 'virtual entrepreneur' model, connecting operatives with online supporters to plan and execute attacks, as evidenced by arrests of alleged IS-K affiliates in Germany, the Netherlands, and Turkey.²²³

Following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, IS-K has capitalized on the resulting vacuum to re-establish training camps, despite Taliban pressure. These camps now span Afghanistan's borders, including areas along the northern borders with China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, in addition to traditional strongholds along the eastern border with Pakistan. Without significant counterterrorism efforts, these camps could facilitate a more extensive and potentially more lethal campaign of violence, not only in Afghanistan and neighboring regions but also internationally.

While IS-K is presently focused on regional expansion, there are concerns, as highlighted by CENTCOM Commander General Michael Kurilla, that its ultimate goal may involve attacks on the U.S. homeland, although attacks on Europe and other regions are deemed more probable.

In addition to enhancing IS-K's capacity for international attack planning, a stronger network of training camps could facilitate the intake and training of more foreign recruits. As cited earlier in this report, since its establishment in 2015 IS-K has attracted individuals from various countries, including Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, China, France, India, Iran, Iraq, Kazakhstan, the Maldives, the Philippines, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Uzbekistan. The group's leader, Sanaullah Ghafari (also known as Shahab al-Muhajir), has aimed to showcase the diversity of its fighters through attack claims and propaganda, aiming to expand its recruitment pool.

²²³ Amira Jadoon, et al., "The enduring duel: Islamic State Khorasan's survival under Afghanistan's new rulers," CTC Sentinel, August 2023.

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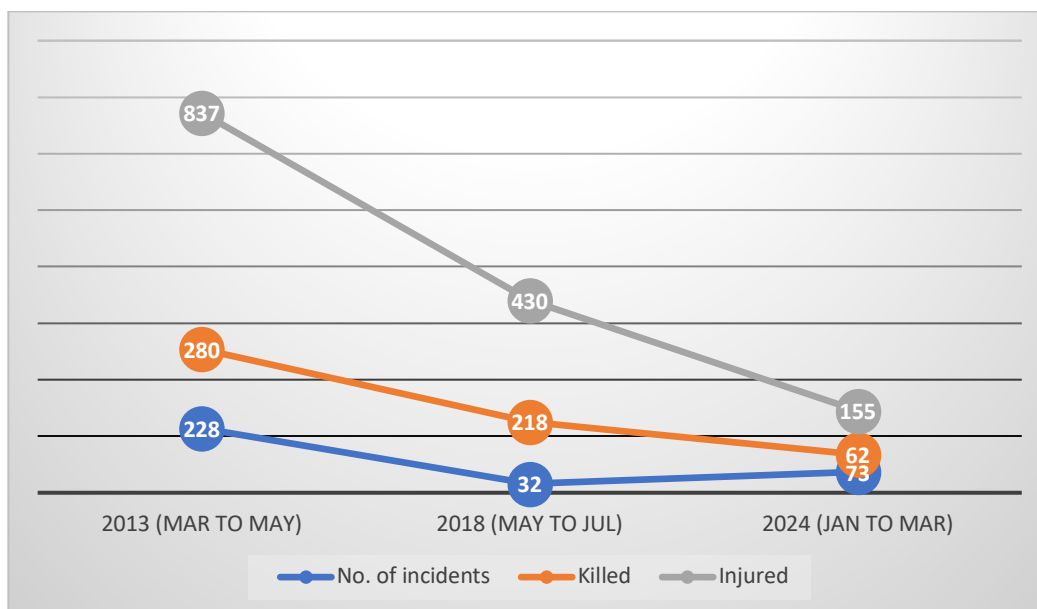
5. Elections 2024: trends of terrorist and political violence²²⁴

Terrorist attacks on political leaders and workers and other election-related targets have become a regular feature of terrorist violence in Pakistan. Similarly, supporters and workers of different parties are also observed engaging in incidents of political violence, including armed clashes and attacks during election campaign and on polling days.

Pak Institute for Peace Studies has been monitoring and documenting this election-related violence, including both terrorist and political acts as described earlier, since 2006. A comparison of such violence over the last three elections reveals that 2013 was the most violent, with a significant decrease in such incidents during the 2018 elections, followed by resurgence in 2024. However, consequent casualties, both deaths and injuries, have shown a steady decline from 2013 to 2024 elections.

- In the three months leading to the **2013 elections** (March to May), as many as 148 terrorist attacks targeted political leaders, workers, election-related gatherings, rallies and offices, etc. Additionally, there were 80 incidents of political violence. Thus, a total of 228 incidents of election-related violence were recorded, resulting in the death of 280 people and injuries to another 837.
- In the three months leading up to the **2018 elections** (May to July), 19 terrorist attacks hit election-related targets, while 13 incidents of political violence occurred. Consequently, a total of 32 incidents of election-related violence were recorded, marking a significant decline from 2013. However, the resulting casualties (218 deaths and 430 injuries) represented only a slight decrease from the previous elections.
- During the **2024 elections**, held on February 8th, the number of incidents of election-related violence increased from previous elections held in 2018, but the consequent casualties declined significantly. In the three months leading up to the elections in 2024 (January to March), there were 73 incidents of election-related violence (55 terrorist attacks and 18 incidents of political violence), resulting in a total of 62 deaths and 155 injuries.

²²⁴ Data and statistics used in this section are mainly derived from Pak Institute for Peace Studies' digital database on security incidents: <www.pakpips.com/app/database>

Chart 3: Comparison of election-related violence across the last 3 elections

5.1 Background: Election-related violence in 2018 and 2013

Unlike the 2013 election, when terrorist violence against political leaders, workers, and election-related gatherings and rallies had increased at least 3 months before the election month (May 2013), in 2018 such violence largely occurred during the election month (July 2018). Despite a decreased number of attacks in 2018, there were significant casualties. Baloch and Sindhi nationalist insurgent groups perpetrated low-intensity attacks, but a major chunk of fatalities was reported in attacks perpetrated by the Pakistani Taliban such as the TTP and the Islamic State group, mainly in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces. For instance, a single suicide blast in the Mastung district of Balochistan in July 2018 claimed 150 lives. Nawabzada Siraj Raisani, a Balochistan Awami Party (BAP) candidate for a Provincial Assembly seat, was among those killed.²²⁵

Similarly, on July 25, 2018, a suicide blast near the Eastern Bypass of Quetta claimed 31 lives, including 6 policemen and 2 minors, and injured 70 others.²²⁶ Both these attacks were claimed by the Islamic State.

Two such attacks were reported from Peshawar, including a major one. Reportedly, ANP leader and candidate for a provincial assembly seat, Haroon Bilour was among 21 killed in a suicide blast at a corner party meeting in Yakatoot area of Peshawar; 65 others were injured. Haroon's father,

²²⁵ *Dawn*, July 14, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1419972/128-perish-as-savage-attack-on-mastung-rally-stuns-nation>; *Daily Dunya* (Urdu), July 14, 2018, http://dunya.com.pk/index.php/dunya-headline/447938_1#.W0oSTGQzbZs; *Daily Dunya* (Urdu), July 17, 2018, http://e.dunya.com.pk/detail.php?date=2018-07-17&edition=ISL&id=4046202_22010588

²²⁶ *Daily Jang* (Urdu), July 25, 2018, <https://jang.com.pk/news/525636>; *Dawn*, July 26, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1422870/31-die-in-suicide-bombing-outside-quetta-polling-station>; *Dawn*, July 25, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1422529>

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Bashir Bilour, a prominent ANP leader, was also killed in a suicide blast in Peshawar in 2012.²²⁷ Similarly, in DI Khan district of KP, former provincial minister and PTI candidate for a provincial assembly seat, Ikramullah Gandapur, was killed along with his driver and a policeman in a suicide blast in Kulachi tehsil.²²⁸ In Bannu, JUI-F leader and MMA candidate from NA-35, Akram Khan Durrani survived two terror attacks. In one of these attacks, a remote controlled motorcycle-fitted IED blast targeted his convoy, killing 5 people.²²⁹

One other contrasting difference in trends of election-related terrorist violence between 2013 and 2018 can be described in terms of the perpetrators of such attacks. In 2013, out of 148 terrorist attacks, at least 52 were perpetrated by nationalist insurgents, mainly Baloch, and the rest by the Taliban and others. However, in 2018, nationalist insurgents perpetrated only 7 low-scale attacks against political leaders/workers and other election-related targets; however, this corresponded to an overall decrease in such attacks. In 2018, Daesh was behind many lethal attacks targeting political leaders/workers and election-related targets.

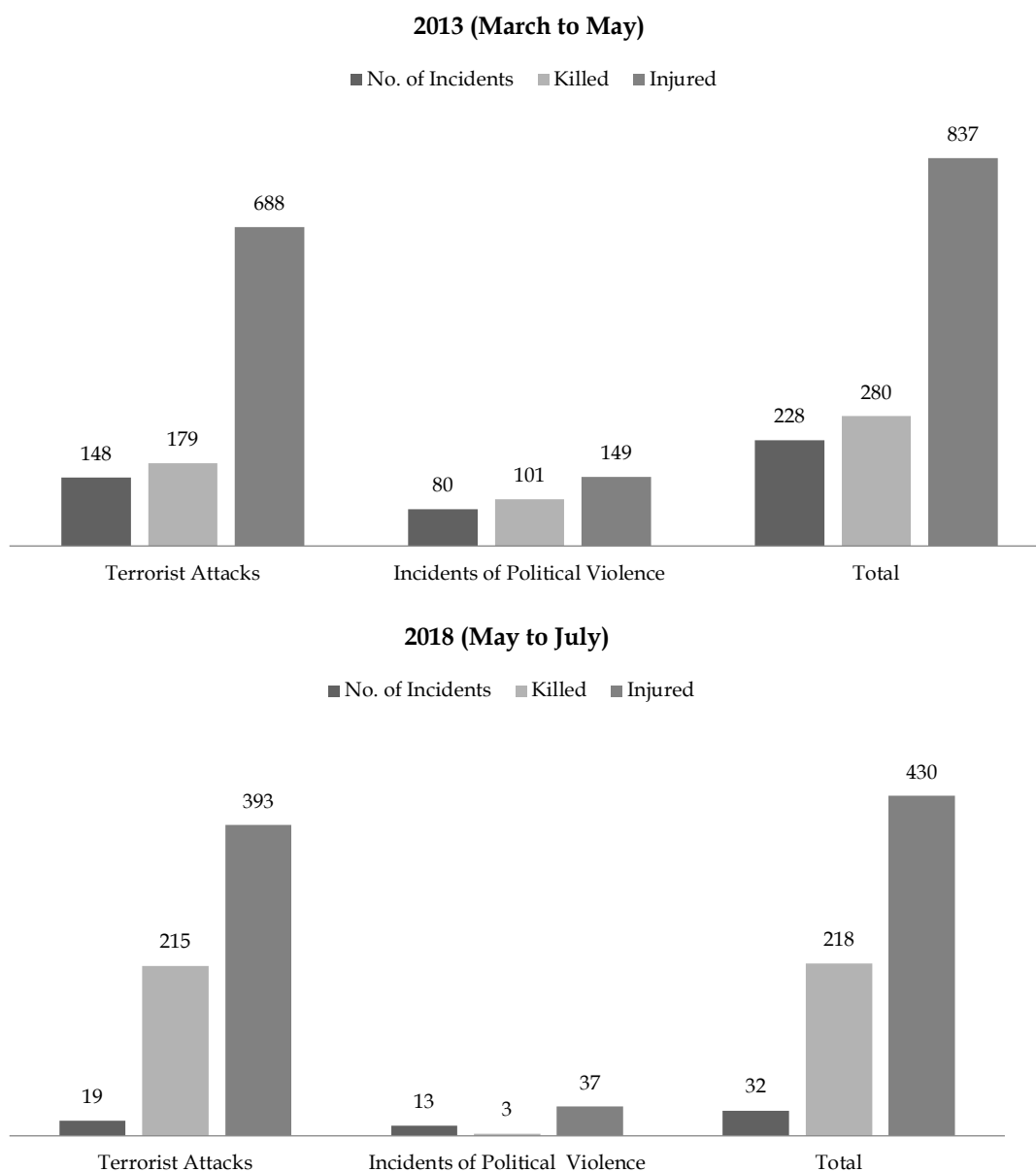
Similarly, the number of incidents of political violence also declined significantly from 80 in 2013 (March to May) – 51 of these were concentrated in Karachi alone – to 13 in 2018 (May to July).

²²⁷ Daily *Jang* (Urdu), July 11, 2018, <https://jang.com.pk/news/519095da>; Daily *Jang* (Urdu), July 12, 2018, <https://e.jang.com.pk/07-12-2018/pindi/pic.asp?picname=52.png>

²²⁸ Daily *Jang* (Urdu), July 23, 2018, <https://e.jang.com.pk/07-23-2018/pindi/pic.asp?picname=517.png>; *Dunya* (Urdu), July 23, 2018, http://e.dunya.com.pk/detail.php?date=2018-07-23&edition=ISL&id=4056397_93712003

²²⁹ *Dawn*, July 14, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1419972/128-perish-as-savage-attack-on-mastung-rally-stuns-nation>; Daily *Dunya* (Urdu), July 14, 2018, http://e.dunya.com.pk/detail.php?date=2018-07-14&edition=ISL&id=4038734_73415703

Chart 4: Comparison of election-related violence in 2013 and 2018



5.2 Election-related violence in 2024

The 2024 elections were held on February 8th. However, threat alerts from official sources, as well as warnings from militants targeting political parties, had started flowing in long before that. For instance, the interior ministry warned in December 2023 of serious threats to the lives of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl emir Maulana Fazlur Rehman and Awami National Party provincial president

Aimal Wali Khan.²³⁰ Following this warning, firing occurred near vehicles of JUI-F chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman's convoy in Dera Ismail Khan on December 31, 2023, but he was not present when the incident occurred.²³¹ On January 2, 2024, a warning was issued to Maulana Asad Mahmood, a former minister and son of Maulana Fazlur Rehman, advising him to restrict his movement ahead of the 2024 elections because he could be targeted by militants.²³²

The IS-K had started targeting JUI-F leaders and workers in KP and other targets even long before that, emerging as a potent threat in this regard. It has not only targeted political leaders but has also been propagating against participating in democratic or electoral processes. For instance, the IS-K carried out a deadly suicide attack on July 30, 2023, that targeted a political convention in northwest Pakistan near the Afghan border. The attack in the Bajaur tribal district claimed 65 lives and injured 127 people. After carrying out the horrific suicide bombing, the IS-K published a 92-page propaganda booklet on the JUI-F and why the group will continue to attack religious political parties in Pakistan. The booklet was published by the IS-K's Al-Azaim media in Pashto and is titled as: "Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam - The Pro-Republic Apostates". In the booklet, the IS-K invited the "ulema, religious students, and monotheists of Pakistan" to join the group or at least support it in any possible way. The group explicitly says that the attack was planned as a warning for those who are willing to participate in elections and celebrate democracy. The pamphlet ends with the mocking of the various militant groups who condemned the suicide bombing in Bajaur, particularly the TTP, and a warning to scholars and religious political parties in Pakistan. Later, in August, the IS-K published a 27-page pamphlet that justified attacks during upcoming elections in Pakistan. Titled "The apostasy of the electoral process", the pamphlet appeared as a religious decree or fatwa that justifies attacks on political and religious parties contesting elections as well as the election process.²³³

With the elections approaching near, the TTP issued a statement that it would not target elections in Pakistan.²³⁴ However, following this statement, a faction of the TTP, Jamaat-ul-Ahrar issued a contradictory statement against democracy and elections.²³⁵ Meanwhile, Baloch insurgent groups had also intensified attacks on political leaders a few months before the elections.

An expert interviewed for this study contended that elections are targeted because this war [militancy], on a broader level, is an ideological conflict, in which the jihadist ideology starkly contrasts with those practiced in democracy. As elections symbolize democracy, the jihadists express their protest or challenge by targeting them²³⁶ Another expert argued that it's unacceptable for IS-K to participate in democratic affairs or struggle for its ideology while remaining within a modern nation-state framework. IS-K aims to uproot the democratic system and replace it with its own. Therefore, it has been warning religious parties against participating in democratic affairs in the country.²³⁷

²³⁰ "Lives of Fazl, Aimal under serious threat, warns interior ministry", *Dawn*, December 30, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1801704>

²³¹ "Firing near vehicles part of JUI-F chief's convoy in DI Khan: police", *Dawn*, December 31, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1802127>

²³² <https://x.com/khorasandiary/status/1742222063018909910?s=20>

²³³ Pak Institute for Peace Studies, *Pakistan Security Report 2023* (Islamabad: Narratives, January 2024).

²³⁴ <https://x.com/KhyberScoop/status/1750600361088569676?s=20>

²³⁵ <https://x.com/Natsecjeff/status/1752044335657263440?s=20>

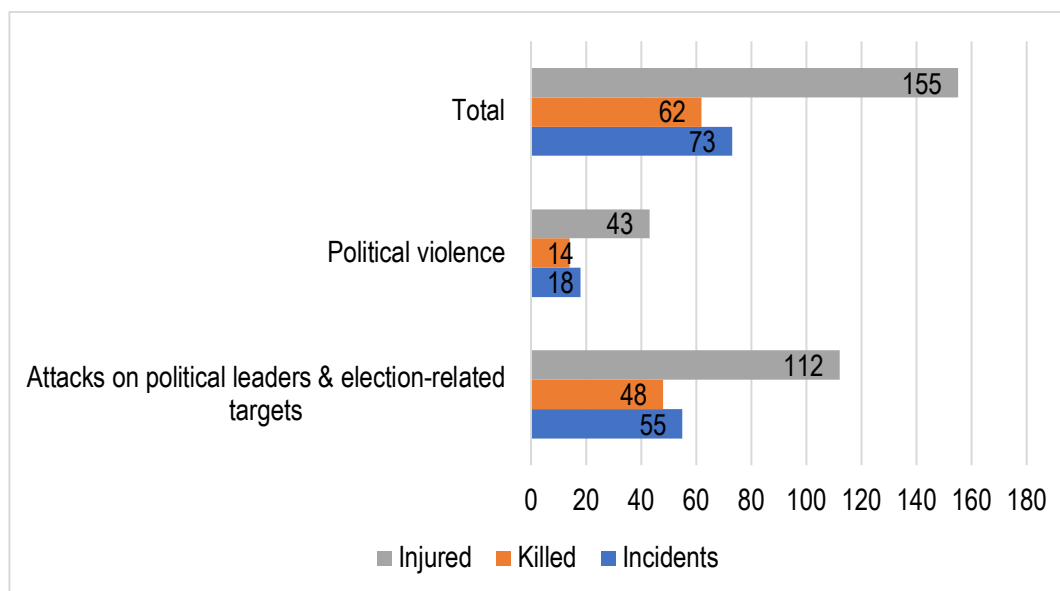
²³⁶ PIPS interview with Dr. Aamer Raza, Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science in UoP, on September 5, 2023.

²³⁷ PIPS' interview with Inayat Ullah Khan, member Jamaat-e-Islami, in Peshawar on September 4, 2023.

5.2.1 Data on 2024 election-related violence

As cited earlier, in the three months leading up to the elections in 2024 (January to March), there were 73 incidents of election-related violence (55 terrorist attacks and 18 incidents of political violence), resulting in a combined total of 62 deaths and 155 injuries.

Chart 5: Election-related violence in 2024 (January to March)



- **Terrorist attacks on election-related targets**

Out of a total of 55 terrorist attacks against election-related targets, as many as 40 attacks were perpetrated by different Baloch groups, mainly in Balochistan province. Religiously inspired militant groups such as TTP, IS-K, and others claimed responsibility for 15 attacks, resulting in the most casualties.

These terrorist attacks targeted political leaders and workers, election candidates, rallies, gatherings, as well as offices of the Election Commission of Pakistan and polling stations, including those established at schools.

Political leaders, workers, and candidates from the following parties experienced these attacks: JUI-F, Pakistan Tehrik-i-Insaf (PTI), Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam-Nazriyati (JUI-N), Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), National Party (NP), Awami National Party (ANP), Pakistan Tehrik-i-Insaf Parliamentarians (PTI-P), and independent election candidates.

Table 10: Terrorist attacks on election-related targets (Jan to Mar 2024)

District	Attacks	Killed	Injured	Responsible group
Bajaur	2	1	4	IS-K/ISPP
Gwadar	2	0	2	BLF, unspecified nationalist insurgents
Kalat	2	0	3	BRAS (an alliance of BLA, BLF and BRG)

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Karachi	1	0	3	TTP
Kech	10	1	3	BLF, BRAS, unspecified nationalist insurgents
Kharan	5	2	5	BLA, BRAS
Khuzdar	2	0	0	BLA, BRAS
Kohlu	2	0	3	Baloch Republican Guards, BRA
Lasbela	1	0	3	BRAS
Mastung	3	0	2	BRAS
North Waziristan	2	3	2	Unknown militants
Panjgur	9	1	4	BLA, BRAS
Pishin	1	20	29	IS-K/ISPP
Qilla Abdullah	2	1	1	IS-K/ISPP, TTP
Qilla Saifullah	1	13	25	IS-K/ISPP
Quetta	5	0	8	BLA, BRAS, unknown militants
Shangla	1	0	1	Unknown militants
Sibi	1	4	6	IS-K/ISPP
South Waziristan	2	1	8	Local Taliban
Swabi	1	1	0	Unknown militants
Total	55	48	112	

Out of the 55 attacks cited earlier, as many as 19 happened in January, another 36 in February, while no such incident took place in March.

In January 2024, militants intensified their attacks on political leaders and election-related targets across Pakistan. A total of 19 such attacks were recorded in the month, with 17 targeting political leaders and election candidates, and two targeting ECP offices. These attacks resulted in 11 fatalities and 26 injuries. The incidents occurred across 12 districts, including Bajaur, North Waziristan, Shangla, and Swabi in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa; Kalat, Kech, Kharan, Mastung, Qilla Abdullah, Quetta, and Sibi in Balochistan; and Karachi in Sindh.

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, IS-K was reportedly involved in two attacks against political leaders in January. On January 3, JUI-F's candidate for the provincial assembly's PK-19 constituency, Qari Khairullah, narrowly escaped a remote-controlled blast in Bajaur.²³⁸ Later, on January 31, PTI-affiliated election candidate from NA-8 and human rights activist, Rehan Zeb Khan, was busy electioneering in a locality of Bajaur when assailants opened fire on his vehicle. Zeb Khan and four others were injured and Mr Khan later succumbed to his injuries. IS-K claimed the attack.²³⁹

Separately, Chairman National Democratic Movement and former member of the National Assembly Mohsin Dawar was on his back after electoral campaign in Tapi area of Miranshah in

²³⁸ Daily *Mashriq* (Urdu), January 4, 2024, <https://mashriqtv.pk/story/?story=202401040126>

²³⁹ *The Nation*, January 31, 2024, <https://www.nation.com.pk/31-Jan-2024/pti-affiliated-candidate-rehan-zeb-khan-gunned-down-in-bajaur>

North Waziristan when unknown attackers opened fire on his convoy. His bullet-proof vehicle was partially damaged in the targeted attack, but he remained unhurt.²⁴⁰

Balochistan experienced 12 such attack in January, with 10 targeting political leaders and workers, and another two hitting the offices of the ECP. The BLA, BLF and BRAS were involved in the majority of these attacks, while the TTP and IS-K groups carried out one attack each. BRAS is an alliance of Baloch insurgent groups, with BLA and BLF being the key members, alongside BRG, which is not as active.

February 2024 was an election year in Pakistan, with the general election held on February 8th. Throughout the month, a total of 36 such attacks were recorded, comparing to 19 attacks in the month before. These attacks resulted in the death of 37 people and injuries to another 86 people. The incidents occurred across 13 districts, with 12 located in Balochistan and one in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, two incidents of terrorist violence happened targeting political leaders and election candidates, both in South Waziristan. One day before the February 8th elections, an IED explosion occurred near the vehicle of Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf Parliamentarians (PTI-P) candidate for PK-110 Naseerullah Wazir in South Waziristan causing minor injuries to five people.²⁴¹ Later, on February 11th, militants targeted the vehicle of a PTI-backed election candidate, Zubair Wazir, with a bomb in the tribal district. One person was killed, and three others were injured.²⁴²

Balochistan experienced 34 such attack in February (including 10 on the election day of February 8th), with three perpetrated by the IS-K and the rest by different Baloch insurgent groups. However, the majority of the casualties were caused by two of the attacks perpetrated by IS-K in Pishin and Qilla Saifullah, totaling 33 deaths and 54 injuries.

While IS-K employed vehicle-borne bombings in the two major attacks targeting political leaders/workers, and election-related sites, the Baloch insurgents predominantly utilized hand grenades (20 attacks), occasionally resorting to firing, IEDs, and rocket attacks. Below are some accounts of these incidents:

- February 2: In the Mughalsarai area of Kalat town, three PPP workers were injured when an unknown motorcyclist attacked the party's election office by hurling a grenade that exploded close to the building. **BRAS** (an alliance of BLA, BLF and BRG) claimed the attack.²⁴³
- February 2: **BLA** militants hurled a hand grenade which exploded near the election office of Sailab Khan, an Olasi Jirga candidate from PB-45. Three people were injured in the attack.²⁴⁴
- February 7: Militants had parked an explosive-laden motorbike outside the office of Asfandiyar Kakar, an independent candidate for PB-47, in Khanozai area, which blew up as his supporters arrived for a meeting to finalise the names of polling agents. At least 19 people were killed and

²⁴⁰ Daily *Mashriq* (Urdu), January 4, 2024, <https://mashriqtv.pk/story/?story=202401040124>

²⁴¹ Daily *Dunya* (Urdu), February 8, 2024, https://e.dunya.com.pk/detail.php?date=2024-02-08&edition=ISL&id=7119644_12552140

²⁴² *Dawn*, February 12, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1813436/daesh-ringleader-killed-in-khyber-operation-ispr>

²⁴³ *Dawn*, February 3, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1810850/explosions-target-candidates-parties-offices-in-balochistan>

²⁴⁴ Urdu News, February 3, 2024, <https://www.urdunews.com/node/833256>

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30 injured; one injured young man later died in a hospital on February 10. *Islamic State's Pakistan chapter* claimed the attack.²⁴⁵

- February 7: A motorcycle-borne IED blast occurred close to the office of Maulana Abdul Wasay, the JUI-F provincial chief and election candidate for NA-251, in Qilla Saifullah. At least 13 people were killed and 25 injured in the attack that was claimed by *Islamic State's Pakistan chapter*.²⁴⁶
- February 8: An IED blast targeted a Levies vehicle escorting polling staff in Kharan, resulting in the deaths of two officials and injuries to another five. Banned *BLA* claimed the attack.²⁴⁷
- February 8: A roadside IED blast targeted the vehicle of an independent election candidate for PB-9 Mir Liaquat Marri in Kohlu. Three people were injured including Marri's brother. The banned *BRA* was reportedly involved.²⁴⁸
- February 8: *BLF* militants fired on the vehicle of a Balochistan Awami Party (BAP) election candidate Mir Akbar Askani in Khairabad area of Kech injuring one person.²⁴⁹
- February 8: Bomb blasts and grenade explosions were reported from 14 locations in Gwadar city and peripheral areas. These included attacks on deputy commissioner's vehicle, polling station stations in Pasni, and polling stations in Jewni. AT least two Levies officials were injured.²⁵⁰ The banned *BLF* was believed to be involved.
- February 8: A 10-year-old child was killed and four others injured in Panjgur town when *BLA* militants fired rockets at a polling station set up inside the Government Boys High School.²⁵¹
- Incidents of political violence

Apart from the terrorist attacks cited earlier, 18 incidents of political violence or armed clashes between workers and supporters of different political parties were reported, occurring in 14 districts as listed in the table given below.

Table 11: Incidents of political violence (Jan to Mar 2024)

District	Attacks	Killed	Injured
Attock	1	0	0
Chakwal	1	0	4
D.I Khan	1	3	5
Duki	1	0	4
Gujrat	1	0	1
Karachi	4	2	6
Karak	1	0	2
Lahore	2	0	5
Larkana	1	6	5
Lasbela	1	2	3
Quetta	1	0	0

²⁴⁵ Daily *Dunya* (Urdu), February 8, 2024, https://e.dunya.com.pk/detail.php?date=2024-02-08&edition=ISL&id=7119644_12552140; Daily *Jang* (Urdu), February 8, 2024, <https://e.jang.com.pk/detail/625433>; Daily *Jang*, February 11, 2024, <https://e.jang.com.pk/detail/627138>

²⁴⁶ Daily *Dunya* (Urdu), February 8, 2024, https://e.dunya.com.pk/detail.php?date=2024-02-08&edition=ISL&id=7119644_12552140; Daily *Jang* (Urdu), February 8, 2024, <https://e.jang.com.pk/detail/625433>

²⁴⁷ Daily *Jang* (Urdu), Quetta, February 9, 2024, <https://e.jang.com.pk/detail/625907%22>

²⁴⁸ Daily *Jang* (Urdu), Quetta, February 9, 2024, <https://e.jang.com.pk/detail/625907%22>

²⁴⁹ Daily *Jang* (Urdu), Quetta, February 9, 2024, <https://e.jang.com.pk/detail/625907%22>

²⁵⁰ Daily *Jang* (Urdu), Quetta, February 9, 2024, <https://e.jang.com.pk/detail/625907%22>

²⁵¹ *Dawn*, February 9, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1812599/nine-killed-in-kp-balochistan-election-violence>

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Rahim Yar Khan	1	0	5
Sheikhupura	1	0	0
Ziarat	1	1	3
Total	18	14	43

The workers and supporters of the following political parties were found involved in these acts of political violence: PML-N, PTI, PPP, and PML-Q in Punjab; PPP, PTI and JUI-F in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa; PPP, MQM-P, and GDA in Sindh; and PPP, BAP, PML-N, PTI and independent candidates in Balochistan.

Two armed clashes between protesting leaders/workers of political parties and security forces were also recorded in February 2024. First, on February 9th, three people were killed, and 30 others, including seven policemen, sustained injuries when the situation during a protest staged by the supporters of a PTI-backed candidate in Shangla turned ugly. The activists were protesting against the delay in releasing the results.²⁵² Next day, three National Democratic Movement (NDM) workers were killed and 14 others, including party chairman Mohsin Dawar, injured when during a clash police allegedly opened fire on a protest in Miramshah Cantonment. Daily *Jang* reported three policemen were also martyred in the clash.²⁵³

²⁵² *The News*, February 10, 2024, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1156236-three-killed-as-protest-turns-violent-in-shangla>

²⁵³ *Dawn*, February 12, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1813436/daesh-ringleader-killed-in-khyber-operation-ispr>; Daily *Jang* (Urdu), February 11, 2024, <https://e.jang.com.pk/detail/627171>

6. Analysis of state responses and capacities

Pakistan faced significant internal security challenges in the post-9/11 period. The country's role as the so-called frontline state in the global war on terror exacerbated internal stability and social cohesion. The northwestern tribal regions, particularly the former FATA, became breeding grounds for both local militants and transnational terrorist groups.

In response to those threats, the Pakistani government ultimately launched full-fledged military operations to flush out terrorist elements from the northwest. As a result, Pakistan achieved considerable success in its counterterrorism endeavors 2014 onwards, leading to an improved overall security environment. However, despite impressive initial successes and a period of relative calm, terrorism has resurfaced in Pakistan, especially following the Taliban takeover of Kabul in August 2021.

Over the years, Pakistan has taken various measures to address terrorism and insecurity. What is worrying, however, is that the problem is far from being contained. Currently, terrorism is resurgent in Pakistan, highlighting the persistent challenge of maintaining internal security stability. Continued vigilance and a diversified approach by the state are essential to effectively counter the evolving threats posed by terrorism and extremism.

This section assesses and analyzes Pakistan's efforts and measures taken thus far to counter terrorism, as well as violent and non-violent extremism in the country. These measures are delineated separately political or soft and kinetic measures in the following pages.

6.1 Political or soft measures

As noted earlier, after a relative decline following 2014, Pakistan's security situation has become challenging again with an increased incidence of terrorist violence. Experts argue that Pakistan's counterterrorism campaign, since the early 2000s, has been largely kinetic, or muscular, and less soft, or political, which is why the counterterrorism successes have not been sustainable.

Experts agree that Pakistan needs to take a different, multi-dimensional approach to deal with the factors, dynamics, and actors of Pakistan's growing extremism challenge, which is not confined to fighting the terrorists militarily only. While successful in the short term, kinetic or hard approaches fail to address the wider issues or causes contributing to violent extremism. For instance, even as hard approaches eliminate terrorists already on the ground, as long as the ideology driving them survives, more will continue to take their place. Therefore, "soft" approaches must be an indispensable component in any CT framework; more so in the case of Pakistan, where not just terrorism but also religious extremism is rampant.

The various soft measures to counter terrorism and extremism taken so far are discussed briefly here.

6.1.1 Policy measures

- **National Action Plan (NAP)**

Initiated in the wake of APS attack in late 2014, the NAP has faced challenges in addressing violent and non-violent extremism. Despite efforts to proscribe hate speech and sanction extremist groups, issues of religious extremism persist including the widespread availability and dissemination of extremist contents and ideologies online. Besides, there have been cases of alleged misuse of counter-terrorism laws and the absence of political reconciliation efforts in Balochistan.

Likewise, the proposed criminal justice reforms and performance of institutions like Nacta have fallen short of NAP expectations. There is also a notable lack of parliamentary interest in NAP.²⁵⁴ Absence of political resolve, inadequate coordination among state agencies, and a predominant military role further complicate NAP's effectiveness. The extremist Barelvi group Tehreek Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) emerged after the enactment of NAP which puts a question mark over the effectiveness of the plan.²⁵⁵

In response to evolving security challenges, the government revised the NAP, reducing it 14 points from original 20. However, experts view the revised plan as vague and potentially prone to misuse. Clauses addressing the spread of terrorism through media and legislative oversight for espionage lack clarity and could be interpreted in ways that restrict press freedom and target sub-nationalist groups.²⁵⁶ These ambiguities stress the need for clearer and more concrete policy measures to effectively counter extremism.

The Parliament's role in shaping policy concerning terrorism and extremism has been insufficient. Ishan Ghani, former head of the National Counter-Terrorism Authority (Nacta), highlights the limited parliamentary engagement in formulating and executing NAP and subsequent National Internal Security Policies (NISPs; 2014-18 and 2018-23). Instead, bureaucratic bodies have primarily overseen critical issues such as the status of banned organizations, which holds significance nationally and internationally. The transition towards addressing extremism and terrorism commenced around 2013 with the establishment of Nacta and the inception of the first NISP (2014-18). However, these endeavors were hindered by flawed processes, characterized by a lack of stakeholder consultation and support, resulting in insufficient provincial ownership and implementation.²⁵⁷

- **National Security Policy**

In December 2021, the then National Security Adviser (NSA) Moeed Yusuf announced that the federal cabinet had also approved the country's first-ever National Security Policy (2022-26), which was approved by the National Security Committee a day earlier.²⁵⁸ The NSP put economic security at the core, which is envisaged to bolster military and human securities in return. The overall framework of the new policy, as stated by the NSA, is safety, security, and dignity of citizens. As far as the implementation framework is concerned, the National Security Division would review progress in collaboration with relevant ministries and departments.

The opposition parties in the Senate called into question the NSP which they said was framed without taking parliament on board. Even the treasury did not show a keen interest in the briefing held for the new policy. Experts see the difference of policymakers in the context that the NSP is the result of a bureaucratic exercise, and political parties, civil society, and parliament were not taken on board. According to a few media reports that quoted the participants of the meeting, the

²⁵⁴ "Strengthening governance in Pakistan," a joint report by FES Pakistan and Pak Institute for Peace Studies released in December 2020. It can be downloaded here: <https://www.pakpips.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/NAP-Final-from-Hamayun.pdf>

²⁵⁵ Muhammad Amir Rana, "Defining terrorism in Pakistan," FES Pakistan, December 2020, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/pakistan/18094.pdf>

²⁵⁶ Muhammad Amir Rana, "Security policy impasse," *Dawn*, December 26, 2021.

²⁵⁷ Ihsan Ghani, "Pakistan's response to extremism and terrorism," ISSRA Papers Volume-XI, Issue-I, 2019.

²⁵⁸ *Dawn*, December 28, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1666294/historic-achievement-nsa-announces-cabinets-approval-of-pakistans-first-national-security-policy>

NSP offers nothing new, rather it is just a jugglery of the words, and has documented merely existing practices.²⁵⁹

6.1.2 Constitutional and administrative reforms

- **FATA merger**

In 2018, the former tribal agencies of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) were merged with the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province through the 25th constitutional amendment. The move, long overdue, aimed to establish an effective law and order and justice system to help curb militancy in the region. Due to colonial penal codes and administrative vacuum, the region had suffered marginalization, making it safe for local and foreign militants to shelter, plan, and stage terrorist attacks. Therefore, the FATA merger envisaged reforms in diverse sectors to address factors that made the region conducive to militancy.

However, there has been a gap between the envisioned goals and the actual implementations. For instance, the FATA committee recommended a budgetary allocation of 3% from the National Finance Commission (NFC)²⁶⁰ funds for development of ex-FATA over a decade, yet, unfortunately, the recommendation remains unfulfilled. In the fiscal year 2019-20, less than 10% of the allocated development funds were utilized.²⁶¹ In addition, a significant portion of the budget reserved for uplifting the displaced population was diverted to security,²⁶² aggravating the resentment among the local people and adding to their woes. Similarly, locals still await compensation for suffering displacement and losing their homes and livelihoods due to military operations in the past.

The programs for reform and rehabilitation in ex-FATA have been ongoing for years, yet the merged districts continue to lack basic necessities such as clean drinking water, primary healthcare, and education. Simultaneously, although police stations and judicial structures are being established in former tribal districts, the process is very slow and further undermined by the growing terrorism in the region. These challenges are compounded by the persistent suspension of crucial mobile phone and internet services in the region on security grounds. Over the past years, protests have erupted sporadically as locals seek to draw attention to their ongoing plight.

Likewise, the merged districts also harbor a sense of grievance, having reportedly lost 12 seats in the National Assembly and 8 in the Senate.²⁶³ The loss of political representation, coupled with disputes over land rights, has further complicated the situation, prompting increased demands to expedite the reforms process. The slow pace of progress is often blamed for the escalation in land disputes and inter-tribal tensions in various merged districts. In addition to these factors, the presence of hundreds of unexploded landmines continues to pose a significant threat to the lives of local inhabitants.²⁶⁴ Casualties, including among children, linked to landmines, continue to surface, causing intermittent protests by locals.²⁶⁵

²⁵⁹ Pak Institute for Peace Studies, *Pakistan Security Report 2021* (Islamabad: Narratives, January 2022).

²⁶⁰ The NFC award is meant to distribute financial resources between the federal government and the provinces.

²⁶¹ For details, see: <<https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/pakistan-tribal-areas-caught-in-limbo-awaiting-integration/30381219.html>>

²⁶² Khaleeq Kiani, "Tribal regions uplift funds diverted for security enhancement," *Dawn*, Apr 18, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1548224>

²⁶³ "SC admits plea against 25th amendment, merger of FATA with KP," *The News*, September 24, 2020,

<https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/719072-sc-admits-plea-against-25th-amend-merger-of-fata-with-kp-illegal>

²⁶⁴ "Large area in ex-FATA yet to be de-mined," *Dawn*, June 12, 2021.

²⁶⁵ Daily *Mashriq* (Urdu), June 30, 2021, <https://mashriqtv.pk/story?story=202106300101>

Despite the ongoing challenges, efforts are underway to implement the proposed reforms. For instance, a police training school has been established in the Khyber district, aiming to enhance the capacity of local law enforcement. This is crucial as the local police force has borne the brunt of TTP terrorism. The increase in militancy over the past year serves as a grim reminder of the urgency to enhance and strengthen the local security infrastructure. Similarly, as discussed above, efforts to demine the merged districts and resolve land disputes need to be expedited.

6.1.3 Legislative measures

Over the past decades, Pakistan has taken various legislative measures to combat terrorist activities. These measures include enactment of both general and specialized laws.²⁶⁶ Initially, the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) 1860 was utilized to address terrorist-related crimes including waging war against the state, sedition, and mutiny. These core sections remain fundamental to the PPC despite certain amendments in 2018. Below is a brief description of the relevant laws:

- The Suppression of Terrorist Activities (Special Courts) Acts (1974 to 1997) aimed to expedite terrorism-related trials, establishing Special Courts for this purpose.
- The Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA) 1997 serves as the primary law governing counter-terrorism efforts but its broad definition of "terrorism" has led to challenges and delays in trials. Vague definitions have allowed non-terrorism crimes to be tried under its provisions.
- The Anti-Terrorism (Amendment) Act 2020 introduces new offenses such as criminalizing non-compliance with UNSC Resolutions and expands prohibitions on financial assistance to individuals associated with banned organizations.²⁶⁷
- The Anti-Terrorism (Third Amendment) Act, 2020 introduces four new investigative techniques subject to court approval. These aim to improve financial intelligence gathering and international cooperation in combating terrorism.²⁶⁸
- Special Courts established under the ATA were responsible for trying terrorism-related cases and ensuring the safety of witnesses, judges, and others involved in proceedings.
- The Anti-Money Laundering Act 2010 targets money laundering and terror financing. It provides for forfeiting assets derived from such activities.
- The Counter Insurgency Regulation (In Aid of Civil Power) 2011 empowers the armed forces to assist civil administration in specific regions affected by terrorism.
- The Investigation for Fair Trial Act 2013 aims to prevent arbitrary use of powers by law enforcement and intelligence agencies.
- The Anti-Terrorism (Amendment) Ordinance VIII of 2013 focuses on terrorism financing compliance with FATF recommendations.
- The Protection of Pakistan Ordinance 2013 provides for speedy trials of listed offenses.
- The Protection of Pakistan (Amendment) Ordinance 2014 introduces the concept of enemy combatants and addresses issues of missing persons. It granted extended detention powers to LEAs.

Despite these legislative measures, challenges persist with the definitions of terrorism and extremism in Pakistan.²⁶⁹ There have been allegations of authorities misusing counterterrorism

²⁶⁶ Much of the information in this section is derived from Ihsan Ghani's article unless otherwise indicated. Ihsan Ghani, "Pakistan's response to extremism and terrorism," ISSRA Papers Volume-XI, Issue-I, 2019.

²⁶⁷ Kamran Adil, "Anti-Money Laundering and Countering Financing of Terrorism (AML/CFT) laws in Pakistan: An overview," Research Society of International Law, October 12, 2020, <https://rsilpak.org/2020/anti-money-laundering-and-countering-financing-of-terrorism-aml-cft-laws-in-pakistan-an-overview>

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Muhammad Amir Rana, "Defining terrorism in Pakistan," FES Pakistan, December 2020.

laws. Most concerning is the limited involvement of political leadership in security and counterterrorism policies, leaving these matters largely under the control of security forces.

Regarding definitional flaws, the Supreme Court issued a significant ruling in 2019, urging parliament to devise a comprehensive legal framework. The court criticized the failure of the ATA 1997 to clearly define terrorism, leading to its misuse for political purposes.²⁷⁰ The ambiguity in the definition is blamed for hindering prosecution and encouraging extrajudicial actions by law enforcement agencies.

Unfortunately, successive governments have failed to overhaul the criminal justice system to address longstanding structural issues. This led to the establishment of military courts under the National Action Plan (NAP) as a temporary solution to prosecute terrorists. However, military courts cannot serve as an alternative to the much-needed broader judicial reform.

- *FATF²⁷¹ compliance*

Critics often decry FATF-linked legislation in Pakistan as foreign interference in the country's legal and public policy frameworks. Regardless of critics' arguments, Pakistan upholds its international legal obligations enforced by FATF. Three treaties hold significance in this regard: the Vienna Convention, the International Convention for the Suppression of Terrorism Financing, and the UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime. The adverse economic and financial implications of being on the FATF grey list have prompted Pakistan to rectify its legal structures governing terror financing and organized crime.

Pakistan landed on the FATF grey list on February 16, 2018.²⁷² However, in October 2022, FATF removed Pakistan from its grey list, which previously warranted increased surveillance for terrorism financing. The decision to remove Pakistan from the grey list was made by consensus, indicating that Pakistan has completed all substantial, technical, and procedural requirements of both the 2018 and 2021 Action Plans. Consequently, Pakistan was removed from the list of jurisdictions under increased monitoring, effective immediately. This decision was reached during the FATF Plenary meeting held in Paris, France, from October 20-21, 2022.

During the over 4 years of being on the grey list, Pakistan adopted a range of legislative, institutional, and administrative measures to combat the financing of terrorism (CFT) in order to comply with FATF action plans.

For instance, in 2020, the government pushed through over a dozen pieces of legislation to enhance the legal framework on money laundering and terror financing in accordance with FATF standards. The plan for these legislations was outlined by the National Executive Committee, chaired by the Prime Minister's finance advisor, Abdul Hafeez Shaikh, in February 2020.²⁷³ The haphazard manner in which the legislations were rushed through Parliament without sufficient debate was criticized by the opposition and independent analysts.

In 2021, Pakistan implemented significant measures to comply with the FATF action plan. In January 2021, an anti-terrorism court convicted three leaders of the banned Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD) in two additional cases of terror financing. These convictions, handed down by ATC judges in

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) is the global money laundering and terrorist financing watchdog.

²⁷² *Dawn*, February 17, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1389873>

²⁷³ Khaleeq Kiani, "Dozens laws to be amended to meet FATF requirements," *Dawn*, February 21, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1531832>

Lahore and Sargodha, resulted in 14-year imprisonment for Zafar Iqbal and Yahya Mujahid, and six-month sentences for Abdul Rehman Makki in each case of terror financing. Similarly, in April 2022, JuD chief Hafiz Saeed was sentenced to 33 years in jail in two terror financing cases.²⁷⁴ This conviction coincided with FATF's decision to retain Pakistan on its grey list. The watchdog reiterated its call for Pakistan to “do more” to prosecute militants involved in terrorism financing. However, a month prior to its decision to retain Pakistan on the grey list, the FATF did acknowledge that Pakistan had made substantial progress on global commitments to combat financial crimes.

Analysts believe that Pakistan's increased efforts to address deficiencies in its counter-financing of terrorism (CFT) and anti-money laundering (AML) regimes are a result of FATF pressure. Although Pakistan was taken off the grey list in October 2022, as mentioned earlier, a comprehensive institutional response mechanism involving collaboration among relevant institutions will continue to be necessary. A zero-tolerance policy against all radical and violent religious groups remains central to the state's resolve against terrorism and its financing.

6.1.4 Institutional measures

- *National Counter-terrorism Authority (Nacta)*

NAP had called for strengthening the National Counter-Terrorism Authority (NACTA) as an anti-terrorism body. NACTA was originally perceived as a civilian-controlled supervising, monitoring and coordinating the state's anti-terrorism efforts. It was established in January 2009 through an ordinance, and got the parliamentary ratification in 2013.

Although many of the NACTA ideals have not been achieved so far, still some progress has been made. It is engaged in various counter-terrorism initiatives in Pakistan. Nacta-led policy reviews, and intelligence input and analysis do not happen in the public domain and are only for the consumption of the stakeholders. However, it has also started publishing a research journal, which is its interface with the public. Apart from these three recent tasks, NACTA has been managing the charge of coordination.²⁷⁵

As per Nacta website, its CT efforts include monthly intelligence input meetings to identify areas of security concern and develop analyses. The organization also played an important role in enhancing institutional and center-province coordination to fulfill FATF conditions. Likewise, Nacta is also reportedly developing a national counter-extremism plan. Other Nacta activities listed on its website include maintaining record of banned groups and individuals and freezing bank accounts, capacity building of counterterrorism organizations and law enforcement agencies, contributing in madrassa reforms, and strengthening federal-provincial coordination mechanism on CTF, including through Provincial Coordination Committees (PCCs), comprising of provincial and federal departments and intelligence agencies.²⁷⁶ These are some notable contributions in countering terrorism and extremism.

However, many observers argue that the strategic focus of the body tasked with counterterrorism efforts has waned over time. Originally envisioned as a civilian-led entity, the Nacta faced delays

²⁷⁴ “Hafiz Saeed sentence,” *Dawn*, April 10, 2022.

²⁷⁵ Shahzada Sultan, a senior police officer, was quoted in “Strengthening governance in Pakistan,” a joint report by FES Pakistan and Pak Institute for Peace Studies released in December 2020. It can be downloaded here: <https://www.pakpips.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/NAP-Final-from-Hamayun.pdf>

²⁷⁶ NACTA's Annual Administration Report 2019, which can be downloaded here: <https://nacta.gov.pk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/NACTA-Annual-Report-2019-Final.pdf>

in parliamentary ratification due to bureaucratic hurdles and power struggles between the military and civilian administration.²⁷⁷ Control and supervision issues have persisted, with Nacta's effectiveness hindered by a gradual shift towards security institutions' control. Despite this, operating under civilian oversight could allow Nacta to shape legal and policy discussions, particularly regarding the definition of terrorism and the appropriate legal framework for countering it, a departure from the predominant reliance on criminal law in Pakistan.

In one of his research reports, former National Coordinator of Nacta, Tariq Parvez, highlighted the persistent confusion regarding Nacta's jurisdiction, initially between the Interior Ministry and the Prime Minister's office. Although established in 2009, opinions diverged on its oversight until 2013 when the Supreme Court of Pakistan ruled in favor of the Prime Minister's control. However, in practice, the Interior Minister continued to manage Nacta post-NAP, with operational aspects potentially under the Prime Minister's Office.²⁷⁸ According to another account, 'the appointment of National Coordinator has [also] been a major bone of contention between civilians and the military.'²⁷⁹

Similarly, journalists covering jihadist militancy, such as Aqeel Yousafzai and Ziaur Rehman, argue that Nacta has no presence and negligible outreach in the strategically critical regions of KP and Balochistan, which are most affected by militancy. According to them, establishing Nacta's regional offices in those regions would improve counter-terrorism coordination. Adverse perceptions about Nacta's performance also exist within the organization itself. In 2018, there were discussions about abolishing the organization altogether. This reflects underlying issues with Nacta's role and performance.²⁸⁰

- *National Counter-terrorism Department (NCTD)*

In response to the upward trend in terrorist attacks in Pakistan, Nacta has proposed the establishment of a National Counter-Terrorism Department (NCTD). The proposed NCTD would operate under the Nacta at the federal level. This proposed department would be mandated to conduct CT operations across the country, subject to approval by the prime minister.²⁸¹

- *Anti-extremism Enforcement Cell*

The Sindh government has established an anti-extremism enforcement cell in response to rising incidents of religious extremism. The cell is situated within the counter-terrorism department (CTD) of Sindh police.²⁸² The cell operates under the supervision of the SSP operations, and it aims to address extremist activities and enhance operational efficiency within the department.

²⁷⁷ Farhan Zahid, "Counterterrorism policy measures: A critical analysis of Pakistan's National Action Plan," The Mackenzie Institute, July 19, 2026, <https://mackenzieinstitute.com/2016/07/counter-terrorism-policy-measures-a-critical-analysis-of-pakistansnational-action-plan>

²⁷⁸ Tariq Parvez, "NACTA, nay activated," *Conflict and Peace Studies* (2015) 7(2): 51-58.

²⁷⁹ Azam Khan and Amir Saeed, "Fighting terror: institutional structure in the context of NAP," *Conflict and Peace Studies* (2015) 7(2): 29-38.

²⁸⁰ As quoted in "Strengthening governance in Pakistan," a joint report by FES Pakistan and Pak Institute for Peace Studies released in December 2020. It can be downloaded here: <https://www.pakpips.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/NAP-Final-from-Hamayun.pdf>

²⁸¹ Daily *Jang* (Urdu), December 3, 2022, <https://e.jang.com.pk/detail/306609>

²⁸² *Dawn*, November 25, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1722886/ctd-sets-up-cell-to-counter-extremism>

6.1.5 Educational reforms and narrative building

- *Public education*

The public schooling has contributed to religious fundamentalism in Pakistan for decades. The curricula have promoted faith-based discrimination and exclusion, causing social tensions and divisions. The education system was designed to serve the state's goal of promoting a religious-nationalist identity at a mass level rather than fostering intellectual growth among successive generations. The approach is rooted in the flawed idea that the state could manufacture a nation with certain characteristics. The simple fact that nations evolve organically has been lost on Pakistani policymakers.

Discussants at a PIPS webinar in 2021 noted that the state's efforts to manufacture a homogenous national identity through education ignore the rich diversity of ethnic, religious, cultural, and linguistic groups in Pakistan. Students are subjected to indoctrination with biased and intolerant religious narratives that foster extremist tendencies over time. Textbooks prioritize the majority religion i.e., Islam while marginalizing other faiths.

However, even though public education serves as a tool for political indoctrination, the sector has never been a priority for successive civil and military governments. Under the military regime of Pervez Musharraf, the public education system deteriorated beyond repair, leading to the rise of substandard yet overpriced private education. Scholars point out that by privatizing education, the state has effectively shunned its constitutionally-bound core responsibility of providing education to its citizens, which is a fundamental human right. On the other hand, parallel to the downfall of the public education sector, the country has witnessed a spike in the number of madrassas, cementing the perception that the state has abandoned its duty to educate the children.

The nexus between education and extremism, and the need for educational reforms, has been pointed out by numerous observers, including PIPS, over the years. Subsequently, a major step in this direction was taken by the PTI government, which rolled out the so-called "single national curriculum" (SNC), aiming to enforce a unified educational curriculum nationwide. However, questions have been raised by civil society regarding the SNC's emphasis on religious education. Critics argue that reliance on religious scriptures for narrative building during schooling gradually led to religious fundamentalism in Pakistan. There were also complaints about the lack of transparency in the process of building and implementing the SNC.

- *Madrassa reforms*

Despite the consistent expansion of the madrassa sector, the government has failed to implement reform and regulation measures. The clause 10 of NAP called for registration and regulation of madrassas. The task has proven to be complex and highly challenging for the government. Practically, there has been little progress on reforms.

Traditionally, attempts to reform the madrassas in Pakistan start with a discussion on curricula reform. Various governments have been trying to introduce different subjects and courses with a view to enhance exposure of madrassa students to scientific thinking. But that has not helped in bringing about any discernable change in the environment of madrassas or the mindset that is developed there.

A PIPS study in 2018 found that the political views of madrassa students are also sectarian-oriented.²⁸³ It was not surprising because the five boards of religious education in Pakistan represent different sectarian denominations. So, sectarianism is inherently embedded in the orientation of each madrassa based on its affiliation with one or the other board. Another contentious area in madrassa reform is the external financing. The NAP attempted to overcome gaps in the financial regulation of madrassas. As per official records, at least 12 countries provided up to 300 million rupees in funding to around 80 madrassas in Pakistan during 2013-14. During the same period, authorities believed that individuals or institutions from abroad also sent funds to madrassas without any proper check.²⁸⁴

Sindh province has taken some measures for madrassa regulation. In 2016, the provincial government introduced the Sindh Madrassa Registration Bill. The bill encompassed nearly all issues concerning the madrassas in Sindh that the NAP proposed tackling.²⁸⁵ On the other hand, the federal government also took some measures for madrassa reforms. It reportedly closed down 254 unregistered and suspicious madrassas across the country under the national action plan in 2015. Besides, it has done geo-tagging of some madrassas.

In 2020, it was revealed that the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training was tasked to register madrassas. According to the ministry website, registration is the first step that will be followed by facilitation in opening of bank accounts of madrassas and issuance of visas to foreign students as well as provision of technical and vocational education to madrassa students. Under the ministry, a directorate general of religious education (DGRE) has been established in Islamabad with its suboffices in different cities. The DGRE will carry out registration and other related tasks.²⁸⁶

However, it is a welcome development that madrassas are now under the regulation of the education ministry, which also implies that the government has finally acknowledged that madrassas do not fall in the administrative or security domains but need to be looked at in the educational context.

Madrassa reforms were also a focal point of the FATF talks. The reform of the madrassa sector likely formed part of the discussions during the FATF meetings, given that in January 2020, Pakistan informed the FATF's joint group in Beijing that, under new reforms, madrassas had been granted the status of schools where students would receive matriculation and intermediate education certificates. Concerns about madrassas stemmed from the fact that many of them had ties to radical militant groups and had historically contributed to maintaining the militant network in Pakistan.²⁸⁷

²⁸³ Pak Institute for Peace Studies, "Exploring the madressah mindset," 2018, https://www.pakpips.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Exploring_the_Madrassah_Mindset.pdf

²⁸⁴ Mujtaba Rathore, "Madrassa reforms: the debate," *Conflict and Peace Studies* (PIPS) 7(1): 25-42.

²⁸⁵ Pak Institute for Peace Studies, *Pakistan Security Report 2016* (Islamabad: Narratives, 2017).

²⁸⁶ Details can be seen here:

<http://mofept.gov.pk/ProjectDetail/YzYxNjUwNDktMjgzMi00YmU3LTkxMzItYWWRiZWZjNmU4MjM3>

²⁸⁷ Robert Looney, "Reforming Pakistan's educational system: the challenge of madrassa," Naval Postgraduate School, 2003 <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/36733201.pdf>

- ***Paigham-e-Pakistan***

The Paigham-e-Pakistan (PeP) was prepared as a blueprint of an inclusive Pakistan. The document was meant to serve as a counter-narrative to violent ideologies.²⁸⁸ The PeP was formally endorsed by religious scholars of almost all schools of thought including leaders of proscribed groups. Many viewed it as a positive development that banned sectarian and militant groups were spearheading the PeP advocacy.

However, it proved counterproductive as rival sectarian groups rejected the document, calling it an attempt to provide safe passage to those banned groups which were under severe pressure at the time.

The PeP has failed to create any significant impact because of two reasons. First, the clergy is reluctant to adopt the document as a manual for their mosques and madrassas. Secondly, security institutions led the campaign to promote the PeP at educational institutions which created suspicions towards the PeP in the minds of many. There is a need to encourage religious to adopt the declaration as a national agenda. Likewise, the government and civil society (not the military) have to take the ownership of the declaration for a larger impact.

- ***Code of Conduct by the CII***

The Council of Islamic Ideology (CII), a constitutional body that advises the legislature on the compatibility of laws with Islamic principles, has formulated a Code of Conduct (CoC) aimed at curbing sectarian and communal hatred as well as hate speech in the country by involving religious scholars. The 20-point CoC is derived from Paigham-e-Pakistan. In addition to advocating for the protection of the rights of women and non-Muslim citizens, the CoC categorically denounces all forms of violence in the name of religion as rebellion against the state. It also condemns hate speech and the excommunication of other sects, including when propagated through mosques and mass gatherings.²⁸⁹

However, similar to the PeP, the CoC has had a negligible impact on society. Experts argue that measures such as the PeP and CoC have wielded little to no influence on most radical elements and extremist groups in Pakistan. Militants have engaged in terrorism despite these declarations.²⁹⁰

6.1.6 Expansion of security measures

Pakistan has expanded the security arrangements around CPEC due to persistent attacks on Chinese nationals and interests by Baloch separatist insurgents and others. Insurgent groups like BLA and BLF have been posing significant challenge to the safety and security of Chinese nationals in Balochistan. They also deter prospective foreign direct investment in the province. Some analysts view the anti-China insurgency in Pakistan in the broader regional proxy wars that may potentially aim at containing China in the region. In addition, regions like Balochistan and Gilgit-Baltistan voice grievances over inequitable distribution of resources and benefits from CPEC-related developments. Such sentiments tend to fuel domestic support for insurgent groups.

²⁸⁸ Daily *Dunya*, January 17, 2018, https://e.dunya.com.pk/detail.php?date=2018-01-17&edition=ISL&id=3644898_48153406

²⁸⁹ Muhammad Amir Rana, "Sectarianism & civil society," *Dawn*, October 18, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1585683/sectarianism-civil-society>

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

To tackle security challenges, the Pakistani military established a special security division (SSD) in 2016, comprising personnel from various security forces to safeguard CPEC projects. Likewise, Pakistan and China agreed to enhance intelligence sharing, joint patrols, and coordinated efforts.

Provincial authorities have also implemented security measures particularly for the Chinese nationals including the setting up foreign security cells and special protection units (SPUs) in Sindh, KP, and Islamabad to ensure the safety of Chinese nationals within their jurisdictions. In 2022, Pakistan turned down a proposal for a private Chinese company to provide protection to Chinese nationals in Pakistan.

6.1.7 Dialogue and reconciliation

- *TTP*

The Pakistani government has made unsuccessful attempts to negotiate with the TTP in recent years. In 2020, the two sides engaged in secret negotiations facilitated by the Haqqani Network of Afghan Taliban. The talks reportedly collapse in early 2021.²⁹¹ This was followed by terrorist attacks claimed by the TTP. However, towards the end of 2021, the talks were resumed with the help of the Haqqani Network again. In October 2021, Prime Minister Imran Khan told the media that his government was in talks with the TTP with the goal of seeking reconciliation.²⁹² A month earlier, the foreign minister had said that the government was open to pardoning TTP members who abandoned violence and submitted to the Pakistani constitution.

In November 2021, the information minister, Fawad Chaudhry, revealed that the two sides had reached a month-long ceasefire agreement.²⁹³ Meanwhile, the TTP had unveiled six demands which included, among other things, release of over 100 TTP militants from prisons.

However, opposition parties were not impressed by PTI government's unilateral engagement in talks with a terrorist group. They demanded that the question of talks be put before the parliament to decide. Many questioned the whole idea of talking to a terrorist group that has killed thousands of Pakistanis including innocent children at the APS in Peshawar.²⁹⁴ Understandably, the Supreme Court was petitioned against the PTI government's policy of talking to terrorists in November 2021. During the hearing of the petition, Justice Amin questioned if the government was planning to bring back the TTP to the table instead of taking action against them.²⁹⁵

Security analyst argued that while the TTP was already emboldened by the Afghan Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, talks of reconciliation from Pakistan would only embolden the TTP further. Besides, talking to terrorist groups like TTP amounted to squandering the successes achieved through the military operations in ex-FATA and elsewhere in the country.

Pakistan has a record of making peace deals with terrorist groups, and none of them achieved peace. The peace talks that was lingering in 2022 collapsed in November after the TTP ended the ceasefire unilaterally, accusing the government of continuing operations against TTP factions and

²⁹¹ Franz J, Marty, "Spike in violence follows failed negotiations between the Pakistani Taliban and Islamabad," *The Diplomat*, April 3, 2021.

²⁹² "Govt in talks with TTP groups for reconciliation process," *Dawn*, October 1, 2021.

²⁹³ Rizwan Shehzad, "Govt, TTP agree to cease fire," *The Express Tribune*, November 8, 2021, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2328439/govt-ttp-agree-on-a-complete-ceasefire-fawad>

²⁹⁴ A total of 147 people, 132 of them children, were martyred when TTP militants stormed the APS-Warsak School, in Peshawar, in 2014.

²⁹⁵ Haseeb Bhatti, "APS carnage: SC grills PM Imran.....," *Dawn*, November 10, 2021.

members.²⁹⁶ Currently, the country is indeed caught in a dilemma as on the one hand it cannot push the Afghan Taliban to act against the TTP and on the other hand it cannot afford the TTP's resurgence either in Afghanistan or Pakistan. Meanwhile, the TTP is unwilling to budge on its demands including the reversal of FATA's merger with KP.²⁹⁷

The Pakistani decision-makers realized rather lately that the negotiations were mainly a smokescreen that accorded time to the TTP to reorganize and rejuvenate.²⁹⁸ Most participants of PIPS-led quarterly consultations on Afghan peace and reconciliation held in Islamabad between July 2021 and May 2023 also disapproved the method of government's talks with the TTP. Many observers raised concerns about the credibility of the jirga and the delegation that engaged with the TTP in talks, arguing that instead of security forces or jirga it should be the political government or representatives of the people.

- ***Baloch insurgency***

The NAP objective of achieving political reconciliation in Balochistan has fallen short of realization. Initiatives such as the 'peaceful Balochistan' that offer financial and rehabilitation support to insurgents who surrender have been unsuccessful. Reconciliation efforts have been marred by challenges including lack of support from all political and military stakeholders and the absence of a consensus roadmap.

Prior to the enactment of NAP, the PPP government (2008-13) pursued political reconciliation to address the ongoing insurgency. It announced a special package to the province called the Aghaz-e-Huqooq-e-Balochistan package and increased Balochistan's financial shares from the NFC. However, differences between the political leadership and the military on engaging with Baloch separatists hindered the process from the outset.²⁹⁹

When NAP was initiated in early 2015, efforts were made to reconcile with Baloch insurgent leaders including those in self-exile in Europe. Dr. Abdul Malik Baloch, then Chief Minister of Balochistan, was tasked by the prime minister to lead the reconciliation effort.³⁰⁰ But, Malik's tenure was cut short by the Murree Accord which resulted in Malik being replaced by Sanaullah Zehri. Zehri reportedly opposed reconciliation with Baloch insurgent leaders due to his old enmities with some of the insurgent leaders. In 2017, Pakistan reportedly requested the Swiss government to extradite Brahmadagh Bugti, a separatist leader, to Pakistan which was rejected.³⁰¹ The move further complicated and weakened any reconciliation efforts with the Baloch insurgents.

6.2 Continuing kinetic actions against militants

The new political and military leadership has apparently decided to persist with kinetic actions or security operations against militants instead of giving them leverage and time to regroup through talks or negotiations. Firstly, the top civil and military leaders, who participated in the 41st meeting of the National Security Committee (NSC) held on April 7, 2023, reaffirmed their commitment to thwart terrorism threats and vowed to relaunch the National Action Plan (NAP) to crush militants

²⁹⁶ "TTP terminates ceasefire agreement with government", *Pakistan Today*, November 28, 2022,

<https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2022/11/28/ttp-terminates-ceasefire-agreement-with-government>

²⁹⁷ *The Express Tribune*, July 27, 2022, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2367953/pakistani-clerics-fail-to-soften-ttp-in-kabul-meetings>

²⁹⁸ "NACTA blames talk", *The Nation*, December 10, 2022, <https://www.nation.com.pk/10-Dec-2022/nacta-blames-talks>

²⁹⁹ Interview by PIPS in Quetta in April 2018.

³⁰⁰ Maaz Khan, "Balochistan security in 2017," in *Pakistan Security Report 2017* (Islamabad: Narratives, 2018): 139-146.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*

reportedly coming in from Afghanistan. They expressed a unanimous view that the new wave of terrorism was the result of a soft policy adopted by the previous government that allowed TTP militants to return to safe havens in the country and also released militants from jails in the name of confidence building. The meeting approved the launch of a multi-dimensional and comprehensive operation to root out terrorism from the country.³⁰²

Later, on April 14, military and political leaders expressed consensus and agreement on revisiting the country's anti-terrorism policy during an in-camera briefing to members of the National Assembly. Chief of Army Staff Gen Syed Asim Munir acknowledged that a strategy to engage with terrorists had allowed them to regroup in the tribal areas. Reiterating a zero-tolerance for the terrorists, the meeting vowed to continue with the overarching three-pronged plan – deter, dialogue and development – to root out terrorism from the country.³⁰³

That categorically implies a shift in Pakistan's policy dealing with the threat posed by the militants like the banned TTP. As it shuts the door of dialogue with the militants, at least for now, the whole emphasis appears on eliminating the threat militarily or with the use of force.

At a time when a major shift is occurring within the militant landscape of the country, it becomes crucial to examine the perspective of the state's security institutions. The interviews conducted by PIPS for this study revealed a noticeable refinement of threat perception among law enforcement personnel. Specifically, officials of the police's counterterrorism departments (CTDs) are displaying fewer doubts about the religious and ideological motives of militant groups compared to the past. The TTP attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar in 2014 marked a pivotal shift in the perception of security and law enforcement agencies regarding the terrorists' goals and motivations. While CTDs still maintain the belief that militants serve as proxies for external actors, particularly India and the US, who conspire against Pakistan, they perceive the Afghan Taliban differently. They view the Taliban as opportunists who initially utilized Pakistani soil and resources against the US but have now turned against Pakistan, lending support to the TTP.

However, the CTDs still lack clarity on the group dynamics, connections, and operational strategies of militants. While they have established specialized intelligence units and analysis wings to study militant behavior, they often lack the skills to process data effectively. Consequently, their threat perceptions sometimes rely on popular beliefs and information sourced from both mainstream and social media. This is evident in the divergent views held by CTD officials in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces within the same department regarding the connections between the TTP and IS-K, as well as between Baloch insurgents and the TTP.

The CTDs face funding issues as well; Punjab's provision of funds is attributed to its CTD's greater success. Countering terrorism encompasses a broader spectrum than mere operations; it involves investigation, prosecution, culmination, as well as CVE and deradicalization efforts.³⁰⁴ The CTDs are not adequately equipped and trained to handle all these aspects. As a relatively new department, CTDs are expanding their presence and setups in ex-FATA with limited resources. Increased resources are necessary for intelligence gathering and processing, as well as training and

³⁰² Muhammad Anis, "Soft policy on TTP resulted in new terror wave: NSC," *The News*, April 8, 2023, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1058332-soft-policy-on-ttp-resulted-in-new-terror-wave-nsc>

³⁰³ Malik Asad, "Military, political leaders agree to revisit anti-terror policy," *Dawn*, April 15, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1747735/military-political-leaders-agree-to-revisit-anti-terror-policy>

³⁰⁴ PIPS' interview with Colonel Afzal, CTD Punjab Intelligence Head, in Lahore in September 2023.

the acquisition of the latest gadgets and equipment for extracting and analyzing data from social media and the internet.³⁰⁵

NACTA coordinates all national and provincial institutions or departments working on counterterrorism and also serves as an intelligence hub. CTDs operate either through NACTA or independently. They have compiled a "terrorists' red book" containing details on the most wanted terrorists; similarly, FIA and NACTA also maintain such books.³⁰⁶

6.2.1 Data on kinetic actions in 2023³⁰⁷

In 2023, security forces and law enforcement agencies conducted 129 anti-militant operational strikes in Pakistan, compared to 87 the previous year. These actions resulted in a total of 425 fatalities (373 militants, 43 army soldiers, five policemen, two Levies, and two civilians). Out of the total 129 operational strikes recorded in 2023, 97 occurred in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 28 in Balochistan, three in Punjab, and one in Sindh's provincial capital, Karachi.

Security and law enforcement agencies also engaged in a total of 24 armed clashes and encounters with militants – an increase from 11 such incidents in the previous year. These armed clashes and encounters claimed 55 lives (37 militants, 16 soldiers, and two policemen) and injured three others, including two militants and one policeman.

Additionally, security and law enforcement agencies arrested 377 suspected terrorists and members of militant groups in 87 search and combing operations conducted throughout the country in 2023. These arrests do not include those who were detained and subsequently released after preliminary investigations.

Security forces foiled at least seven major terror plots or bids, either independently or in collaboration with Bomb Disposal Squads, primarily by discovering and defusing improvised explosive devices (IEDs) planted by militants.

The details of these military operations, armed clashes, and terrorists' arrests, as cited earlier, are provided on the following pages.

- Military/security operations

Security and law enforcement agencies stepped up anti-militant kinetic actions in 2023, especially in the second half of the year. They conducted 129 anti-militant operational strikes in 2023, compared to 87 in the year before, in 31 districts and regions of Pakistan. These actions caused a total of 425 fatalities or deaths (373 militants, 43 army soldiers, five policemen, two Levies, and two civilians), as compared to 327 in 2022, besides injuring 51 others.

Out of the total 129 operational strikes recorded in 2023, as many as 97 happened in KP, 28 in Balochistan, three in Punjab, and one in Sindh's provincial capital, i.e., Karachi.

While the anti-militant operations were reported from 31 districts and regions across Pakistan, however there were only nine districts where five or more such operations happened in the year. These were Kech and Quetta in Balochistan, and Bannu, DI Khan, Khyber, North and South Waziristan, Peshawar, and Tank districts in KP. The highest number of kinetic operations for any

³⁰⁵ PIPS' interview with Sohail Khalid, DIG CTD KP, in Peshawar on September 4, 2023.

³⁰⁶ PIPS' Interview with Imran Shahid, DIG CTD KP, in Peshawar on September 4, 2023.

³⁰⁷ Most of the data and statistics provided in this section are sourced from the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies' Pakistan Security Report 2023.

Pakistan's Evolving Militant Landscape: State Responses and Policy Options

one district was reported from North Waziristan (21 operations), followed by DI Khan (17), South Waziristan (12), Khyber (9), Peshawar and Tank (8 operations each), and Kech (7 operations).

Table 12: Anti-militant operations in 2023

District	Attacks	Killed	Injured
Awaran	3	12	2
Bolan	1	2	0
Dera Bugti	1	5	0
Duki	1	2	0
Kalat	1	2	0
Kech	7	29	0
Khuzdar	1	3	0
Mastung	2	4	0
Pishin	1	4	0
Quetta	5	19	0
Sibi	1	1	2
Washuk	1	5	0
Zhob	3	16	0
Balochistan Total	28	104	4
Bajaur	4	10	0
Bannu	5	14	0
Chitral	2	9	10
D.I Khan	17	44	5
Khyber	9	18	8
Kurram	1	1	0
Lakki Marwat	4	25	1
Mardan	3	4	0
North Waziristan	21	67	14
Peshawar	8	19	2
South Waziristan	12	61	5
Swabi	1	2	0
Swat	2	4	0
Tank	8	36	2
KP Total	97	314	47
Rajanpur	1	2	0
Khanewal	1	1	0
Chiniot	1	2	0
Punjab Total	3	5	0
Karachi	1	2	0
Sindh Total	1	2	0
Total Pakistan	129	425 ³⁰⁸	51 ³⁰⁹

³⁰⁸ 373 militants, 43 army soldiers, five policemen, two Levies, and two civilians.

³⁰⁹ 45 militants, 5 soldiers, and one civilian.

○ Security forces' clashes and encounters with militants

Security and law enforcement agencies also entered into in a total of 24 armed clashes and encounters with militants – compared to 11 such incidents in previous year. These armed clashes and encounters claimed 55 lives (37 militants, 16 soldiers, and two policemen) and injured three others including two militants and one policeman.

As many as 21 of these clashes and encounters (or over 87 percent) took place in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (mainly between the security forces and the TTP militants). Meanwhile two such clashes happened in Punjab, and one in Karachi, the provincial capital of Sindh.

Table 13: Clashes between security forces and militants in 2023

District	Attacks	Killed	Injured
Bajaur	1	2	0
Bannu	1	4	0
Charsadda	1	4	0
D.I Khan	2	4	0
Khyber	3	5	0
Kurram	1	1	0
Lakki Marwat	2	5	1
Mardan	1	2	0
North Waziristan	5	12	0
South Waziristan	4	13	2
KP Total	21	52	3
Dera Ghazi Khan	1	2	0
Mianwali	1	0	0
Punjab Total	2	2	0
Karachi	1	1	0
Sindh Total	1	1	0
Total Pakistan	24	55 ³¹⁰	3 ³¹¹

○ Terrorists Arrested

Security and law enforcement agencies also arrested 377 suspected terrorists and members of militant groups in as many as 87 search and combing operations they conducted all over the country in 2023. These arrests do not include those who were detained and then released after preliminary investigations.

Highest arrests for any one region were made in Punjab where 247 suspected members of different banned militant outfits (including Daesh, TTP, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, and Al-Qaeda) were detained during the year. These marked arrests in Punjab indicate multiple things. First, the militants after feeling pressure in KP may find it easy to slip into Punjab and find shelter. Secondly, it could be the militants' deliberate strategy to expand their presence and activities in mainland Punjab that is considered heart of Pakistan. Thirdly, these arrests also indicate that law enforcement agencies in the Punjab are quite vigilant and have maintained a high level of surveillance.

³¹⁰ 37 militants, 16 soldiers, and two policemen.

³¹¹ 2 militants and one policeman.

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Similarly, highest arrests for any one group were made of those affiliated with the TTP (113 arrests). In addition to dozens of IS-K and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi members detained in Punjab [listed as combined members of 'banned militant outfits' in the table below], as many as 15 members of IS-K and nine of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi were also detained in other provinces.

Table 14 lists organizational association and number of different brands of suspected militants arrested across Pakistan by law enforcers in 2023.

Table 14: Suspected terrorists arrested in 2023

Militant Organization	Operations	Terrorists Arrested
Banned militant outfits (inclusive of all)	22	212
Banned sectarian group	1	2
BLA	2	2
BLF	3	5
BNA	1	1
Hafiz Gul Bahadur Group	1	7
ISIS	7	15
Lashkar-e-Jhangvi	5	9
Local Taliban / TTP	38	113
Sindhudesh Liberation Army	1	1
Sindhudesh Revolution Army	4	5
Unknown Militants	2	5
Total	87	377

o Plots/foiled terror bids

Security forces foiled at least seven major terror bids or plots, either independently or in collaboration with Bomb Disposal Squads, mainly by recovering and defusing IEDs planted by militants.

Table 15: Failed/foiled terror bids in 2023

District	Attacks	Killed	Injured
Bajaur	1	0	0
Bannu	1	0	0
Khyber	2	1	2
Lakki Marwat	1	0	0
Peshawar	1	0	0
Quetta	1	1	0
Total	7	2	2

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7. Challenges and policy options

7.1 The fallout from Afghanistan and worsening Pak-Afghan ties

Since the Taliban's takeover of Kabul in August 2021, Afghanistan has once again become a breeding ground for both local and transnational terrorist organizations, according to independent sources and analysts. This resurgence has notably affected the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces of Pakistan, which share borders with Afghanistan and have historically grappled with the Pakistani Taliban insurgency and Baloch nationalist unrest, respectively.

Pakistan has expressed disappointment with the Afghan Taliban's apparent reluctance or inability to address the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) threat. The border region between Pakistan and Afghanistan has experienced heightened insecurity and violence following the Taliban's assumption of power in Afghanistan. Incidents like the incursion by TTP militants from Kunar, Afghanistan, into Chitral district, Pakistan, on September 6, 2023, and clashes between border forces at the Torkham border crossing underscore the escalating tensions. Previously, cross-border attacks from Afghanistan were primarily carried out by militant groups like the TTP, but now, under the Taliban regime, Afghan border forces seem increasingly involved. The Taliban's response to Pakistan's border fencing efforts has been notably stringent and nationalistic.

The deteriorating bilateral relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan, coupled with a lack of meaningful state-to-state engagement, pose significant challenges for Pakistan in addressing terrorist violence and border insecurity. Bilateral mistrust has deepened due to various issues including border disputes, cross-border violence, Afghan refugee repatriation, and visa problems.

The TTP issue has emerged as a major source of tension. Observers suggest that Pakistan's decision to repatriate illegal Afghan refugees was influenced by the Afghan Taliban's apparent indifference towards TTP attacks within Pakistan. Similarly, the cross-border infiltrations by TTP and other groups further raise suspicions about the Afghan Taliban's relationship with terrorist networks. Pakistan remains uneasy with reports suggesting Afghan nationals' involvement in TTP-led attacks within Pakistan, fueling concerns about the Afghan Taliban's support for such activities.

Pakistan should engage in continuous dialogue with Afghanistan, addressing various issues beyond one-time delegations. It's crucial for Pakistan to adopt a people-friendly border management policy to assist Afghan citizens. Ultimately, resolving bilateral challenges hinges on Pakistan's sustained engagement with the Taliban-led interim government in Kabul. The civilian government must take ownership of the Afghan policy, with input from both parliament and security agencies.

7.2 Growing terrorist threat from TTP, IS-K and others

In 2023, Pakistan experienced a significant surge of 65 percent in terrorism-related fatalities, indicating an increase in high-impact attacks compared to the previous year. As highlighted in the preceding section of this chapter, terrorist violence has been rapidly increasing and intensifying in various parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces, with several major attacks also reported in Punjab and Karachi.

Pakistan's negotiations with the TTP, coupled with waning political attention on counterterrorism amid ongoing political and economic challenges, have emboldened the banned TTP and other groups to regroup and escalate terrorist activities in Pakistan. The banned TTP has expanded its

presence by establishing shadow provinces across the country and is employing modern equipment, including night vision sniper rifles, in its attacks. Following a surge in attacks by TTP chapters in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and northern Balochistan, there are indications that the TTP's announced chapters for Punjab province are also becoming active. Multiple recent attacks in Lahore and South Punjab claimed by the group suggest a heightened level of activity in these regions.

Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) has emerged as a significant threat to Pakistan's security in recent years. Following the TTP, IS-K caused the second-highest number of terrorism-related casualties in Pakistan in 2023. Particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), IS-K has targeted Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam leaders, primarily in Bajaur. The group perpetrated a deadly suicide attack in Mastung on September 30, 2023, resulting in the loss of 63 lives. The group was also involved in few major attacks in Balochistan and KP reported during the election month of February 2024.

Meanwhile, the Baloch insurgent groups BLA and BLF remain potent threats, and they could pose even greater challenges to Pakistan in the future. This is due to a shift in the Baloch insurgency dynamics, with the leadership transitioning from traditional tribal elites to educated middle-class Baloch youth. This shift underscores the growing appeal of Baloch sub-nationalism among the youth and serves as a warning for Pakistan to address radicalization among its youth population.

To effectively deal with internal security situation, PIPS recommends the following:

- There must be a consistent zero-tolerance policy towards terrorist groups, with no negotiations for those unwilling to renounce violence.
- Pakistan should establish a robust implementation mechanism for national extremism and security policies, including the revised National Action Plan (NAP). Regular yearly reviews of both the National Security Policy (NSP) and NAP are necessary to enhance responses to evolving security challenges. A parliamentary oversight committee can ensure transparency and effectiveness.
- Enhancing the capacity and role of civilian law enforcement agencies, particularly the CTDs in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, is essential to significantly reduce the terrorist threat. Civilian law enforcement structures, deeply rooted in communities, enjoy greater operational freedom due to their close interaction and trust with the populace.
- Baloch nationalist insurgents, such as the BLA, BLF, and BRAS, pose a significant threat to foreign engagements and workers in Balochistan. Their operations have become highly unpredictable, with the capability to execute high-impact attacks, including targeting foreign nationals and interests. Vigilance and coordination among security and law enforcement agencies are imperative to counter this threat.
- Pakistan should pursue critical shifts in foreign policy, prioritizing peace with neighboring countries like Afghanistan and India. This approach would enable increased investment in essential social services such as health and education, along with governance improvements.
- Introducing employment opportunities for youth and enhancing their living conditions is essential to prevent their recruitment by militants and insurgents. Extensive deradicalization seminars, campaigns, and training programs must be conducted nationwide to counter radicalization effectively.

7.3 National Action Plan & Security Policy

National Action Plan came under discussion a few times during 2023 whenever there were some major terrorist attacks. The previous government had also approved the country's so-called first-ever National Security Policy (2022-26) which is no more heard about.

PIPS recommends the following measures to make the frameworks and implementation of revised NAP and national security policy more effective.

- Civilianize NAP and counterterrorism regime giving leading role to the parliament.
- Modernize and reform police, strengthen its investigation branches, reform the Evidence Act and enhance police's operational autonomy.
- Devise well-defined, realistic, and achievable plans/objectives with effective monitoring and evaluation systems against individual NAP goals/clauses. Monitoring and evaluation be done using clearly defined and concrete performance indicators, otherwise NAP would continue to be judged subjectively on the basis of varying perceptions.
- Strengthen NACTA; the prime minister may take ownership of NAP and use the NACTA platform to regularly review the status of and progress on NAP provisions.
- Reform the criminal justice system with much greater urgency and focus as this particular NAP action has practically remained a nonstarter so far.
 - The government shall review and refine key definitions in the Anti-Terrorism Act 1997 in consultation with relevant stakeholders, which will also contribute to avoiding delays in prosecution.
 - Afford rigorous training and sensitization to the ATC judges in handling terrorism cases.
 - Strengthen ATCs through infrastructural uplift and capacity building.
- Develop and run an effective de-radicalization and rehabilitation program, led by civilians that also engages or partner with civil society organizations.
- Build and promote counter-narratives.
 - The Paigham-e-Pakistan can be a significant ideological response to the extremist ideologies; the message be disseminated widely and transformed into national narrative.
 - Categorization of militants into pro-state and anti-state must end.
 - Curb the access of militant/jihadist and sectarian groups to cyberspace and other means of communications without misuse of related laws, with a view to evade loss of public trust and confidence in state institutions.

7.4 The need for soft approaches to counter violent extremism

Pakistan made significant strides in counterterrorism efforts from 2014 onwards, resulting in an overall improvement in the security environment. However, recent challenges indicate a resurgence of threats. The country's counterterrorism strategy has predominantly been kinetic, focusing on military action rather than political or soft measures.

However, there is a need for a multi-dimensional, all-inclusive approach to address the complexities of Pakistan's extremism challenge. Merely relying on military force overlooks the underlying factors driving extremism. While kinetic approaches may eliminate existing terrorists, without addressing the ideological roots, new militants will emerge. Therefore, soft measures are essential in any counterterrorism framework, particularly in Pakistan, where religious extremism is widespread alongside terrorism.

PIPS believes that the following suggestions, if adopted by the state and society, can contribute to undermining the foundations upon which the extremist and terrorist movements are built.

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- Despite all challenges, democracy has survived in Pakistan, and this reflects the wishes of the people of Pakistan and their firm belief in the democratic political system. Hence, the first and foremost strategy to counter terrorism in Pakistan comes through a true democratic system with free and fair elections, the supremacy of the parliament and sacrosanctity of the constitution.
- Parliament is the center of collective decision-making, and the Parliament must take a lead role in counterterrorism efforts. It must build a clear stance on terrorism, and extremism.
- This is the right of the people's elected representatives to play lead role in policymaking, especially Pakistan's foreign policy towards its neighbors, and play a pivotal role in defining Pakistan's strategy towards CVE and CT.
- The role of political parties is central in this regard. Political parties must articulate their vision for addressing the challenges facing Pakistan and should present their ideas for countering extremism and terrorism at the parliament. All political parties must also refrain from seeking any sort of assistance from extremist groups for electoral matters or political gains.
- While acknowledging the bulging youth population, all political parties also need to empower the youth by providing them space and platform for free expression and creativity as well as leadership.
- Comprehensive educational reforms are needed, aiming at removal of hateful, discriminatory, and insensitive contents from the textbooks and inclusion of more scientific inquiry, debate, and critical thinking and reasoning. There is also a need to increase in education budget to improve the quality of education.
- For ensuring the sacrosanctity of the constitution, it is pertinent to ensure uniform application of the constitution in all parts of Pakistan. It is equally important to promote the values derived from the constitution, including through enhancing constitutional literacy among the people, particularly among the youth.
- It is the duty of the state of Pakistan, being a republic, to reinstate rule of law across the country and to ward off any perception that the state is weak or fragile.
- Similarly, the role of civil society, as a bridge between people and the state, must be acknowledged and exercised. No effort against extremism or terrorism would be viable without the support of civil society. The state must build partnership with civil society to ensure maximum advantage from all soft measures.
- The state and society need to reaffirm freedom of religious beliefs and that no citizen can be denied his/her fundamental rights on account of their beliefs. Parliament and the government shall take all necessary steps for the protection and equitable development of all religious communities.
- It is utmost essential to include women in all walks of life and protect their social, political, and economic rights; the Parliament needs to rectify laws that discriminate against women in any shape or form. Women should also be included in efforts meant to CVE as the UN resolution 1325 acknowledges the role of women in the promotion of peace and security.
- The state needs to own and celebrate the indigenous cultures and languages and promote cultural and linguistic identities in Pakistan.
- The state is suggested to approach CVE and de-radicalization in a holistic manner with involvement of multiple stakeholders. The subject must not be an exclusive domain of the security agencies.
- No reintegration, rehabilitation and mainstreaming [of militants] beyond the frameworks of the Constitution shall be accepted.

- The prison system needs a major overhaul as it often serves as breeding grounds for violent extremism and ideological radicalization.

7.5 Persisting conflict and insecurity in Balochistan

Balochistan stands as vulnerable to rising terrorist violence and insecurity as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. It has rather more diverse militant landscape that includes Baloch nationalist insurgents, religiously inspired militant groups such as TTP, TJP, IS-K and others, violent sectarian groups, as well as Iranian religious-nationalist group operating along the Iranian border. The banned TTP has announced its two chapters for north and south Balochistan, but apparently the northern chapter has already become quite active. The government and security agencies need to act immediately to stop further strengthening of these groups in Balochistan and elsewhere.

The Pakistani state continues to rely on traditional methods to counter the Baloch insurgent movement, primarily through kinetic actions. There is a lack of initiative to engage with insurgent leaders or Balochistan's legitimate nationalist political figures in dialogue or reconciliation processes. The unresolved issue of missing persons further exacerbates tensions. Meanwhile, the intensified terrorist attacks by Baloch insurgent groups not only increase recruitment opportunities among disgruntled Baloch youth but also strain moderate nationalist political forces in Balochistan. The situation in Balochistan transcends mere security concerns, constituting a political conflict that necessitates efforts towards reconciliation alongside security measures.

These are some Balochistan-specific suggestions that emerged during PIPS conversation with the Baloch people, leaders, and experts:

- There is a need to reduce the appeal of insurgent ideology and cause among the Baloch people and that can be done by winning hearts and minds of the people. As the Baloch insurgents and even the TTP tend to exploit the issue of enforced disappearances in the province to win the public support and recruits, the government needs to evolve a plan or policy to manage this particular issue amicably and in accordance with law so that people don't fall for militants' narratives.
- As the socioeconomic trickledown impact of mega development projects for masses in the Balochistan has been minimum so far, Pakistan needs to make sure that people in the province start reaping the benefits of big projects as soon as possible.
- There is a need to increase the socio-cultural engagements between the foreigners working on development or other projects and local populations. Government of Balochistan and development-related departments/authorities need to reach out to people in the province to address the concerns of general public, educated youth and the civil society.
- There is an urgent need of investing in the health and education sector in Balochistan. Both sectors are in shambles, as the hospitals are out of medicines and schools without teachers. Investing only in security will be counterproductive to solving the Balochistan conundrum, which needs a holistic approach.
- Pakistan needs to focus on geoeconomics rather than the geostrategic importance of Balochistan. Makran, in particular, has a great geoeconomics potential which could be reaped, and the lives of locals improved.
- The Baloch demand a network of technical institutions to be set up in the urban areas of the province to train youth from the area to be actively becoming part of development projects. Most of the educated youth of the region is unemployed, according to local, as they do not qualify the technical and experience requirements needed for most of the jobs at Gwadar port and industries that will be set up in future.

7.6 Reforms in former FATA

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa caretaker minister for industries, technical education and merged districts affairs Dr Syed Aamir Abdullah said on December 28, 2023, that former FATA's merger with the province is incomplete as the federal government is yet to release the promised funds to the region.³¹² The government's failure to speed up the process of introducing reforms in erstwhile FATA region after it was made part of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province has left the people complaining and even questioning the merger. Many local groups have been asserting that the merger is not solving their problems and issues and hence it should be reversed; a demand that the banned TTP also made during peace talks with the government.

It was a welcoming development that local body elections were successfully held in ex-FATA in 2021-2022. However, as the merged districts have emerged as the epicenter of the resurgent militancy, there is greater uncertainty about establishing structures of basic service delivery and law enforcement in former FATA districts.

PIPS believes that to rehabilitate the citizens of ex-FATA, there is a need to:

- Enhance the economic and infrastructure development of this strategically critical area.
- Schools, colleges, and universities should be built on modern footings to educate the youth of tribal areas in modern arts and sciences. Along with education, employment opportunities should be introduced to prevent the youth of tribal districts from turning to illicit means of earning their livelihoods.
- Bring back the internally displaced persons and rehabilitate them.
- Speed up the process of political, administrative, and judicial reforms in tribal districts.
- Police in the tribal areas, which is at the frontline of fighting the resurgent TTP and other militant groups, should be incentivized and equipped with the latest weapons to better counter terrorism and the loss of precious police life is reduced.

³¹² "Fata-KP merger incomplete without promised funds: minister," *Dawn*, December 29, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1801468/fata-kp-merger-incomplete-without-promised-funds-minister>

Established in 2006, Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) is an Islamabad-based research and advocacy organisation. The Institute offers a range of consultancy services through a combination of independent research and analysis, innovative academic programmes, and hands-on training and support that serve the following basic themes: Conflict analysis and peace-building; dialogue; prevent/counter violent extremism (P/CVE); internal and regional security; and media for peace and democracy. It also conducts frequent structured dialogues, focus group discussions, and national and international seminars to understand the issues listed earlier and also strengthen partnerships. The outcomes of PIPS research and planned events have frequently and extensively been reported on media that adds to its credibility as an active, effective and well networked civil society organizations. Also, many of PIPS policy reports and recommendations have been credited and also included in the state policy documents and discourses mainly those on security and CVE.



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